

**SHIFT Sermon Series: WEEK SIX**  
**By Rev. Malcolm Smith**

SENDING OUT MESSENGERS

After Jacob finishes separating from Laban then his attention turns to finishing his trip home. Going home means going back to within range of Esau. It's been twenty years since he last saw Esau and he has no idea what Esau is thinking so he sends messengers to Esau to feel things out.

Back in Week 1 we talked about how Jacob usurps Esau's place at first—we need to learn the truth and work on applying it—but ultimately Esau—good loves from the Lord within us—are meant to lead. As we've worked our way through the story we've been looking at the steps of learning and applying the truth, culminating in us consciously choosing over and over again to live our lives differently because of the truth. Through all of that, truth has been leading but now we're coming to the point where it starts to shift towards good leading. This passage describes what it means to have good lead.

This is a pretty advanced stage of spiritual growth but we experience versions of it throughout our process. Like Jacob sending the messengers to Esau, when we're

on the verge of this change we tentatively explore the possibility of what it would be like to have good lead—to obey the truth not for any selfish reason but because we love to. But this isn't a change we can tiptoe our way into. It inevitably involves conflict and crisis.

We can imagine Jacob waiting around for the messengers to come back, wondering how Esau took it. And then the messengers come back with this report: "Esau's coming to meet you and he has a small army with him." We can imagine Jacob hearing this news and saying, "No, no, no, no, NO! This is NOT what was supposed to happen!"

ESAU COMING WITH 400 MEN

It doesn't seem fair. Jacob is trying to do what God told him to and he's come a long way and made a lot of progress and now he feels like he's going to lose everything. We

*"Good" is a word used to mean spiritual good, which... implies willing and doing to another that which is good not for any selfish reason but out of delight and affection for doing it....Once a person has been supplied with the truths of faith he is then gradually led by the Lord to will the truth, and from willing it to putting it into practice. This truth is called the good of truth, for that good is truth present in will and action and is called the good of truth because truth which has been a matter of doctrine now becomes a matter of life. When at length the person takes delight in willing good and so putting it into practice, it is no longer called the good of truth, but simply good. For now he is regenerate, and it is no longer truth leading him to will and do what is good, but good moving him to will and put truth into practice. (Secrets of Heaven 4538:4-5)*

experience the same thing. Even though we may have been trying as hard as we can to follow the Lord, we still find ourselves in situations where the things we care about most are under attack.

When we undergo temptations it feels as though all that we've been working on has accomplished nothing. And yet, it's because we've made progress that we go through crises. If Jacob had stayed in Haran he would never have had to confront his past wrongs against Esau but, because he was willing to follow God back to Canaan, he had to deal with it. If a man never worked on being more honest in his job, he would never have to confront the reality that part of him loves working the system and believes that he deserves whatever we can get without people noticing but, because he makes a conscious effort to work on being more honest, he notices more and more ways that he acts dishonestly.

In the teachings of the New Church spiritual crises like this are called temptations and they come in many forms. They're not just times when we feel "tempted" to do something bad; they're all times when something we love is under attack. We lose our job and our sense of confidence comes under attack. We get into an argument with a close friend and our love of that person and our love of our own point of view and our love of the principles involved all come under attack. We work really hard to be a good parent but find ourselves messing up all the time and our love of being a good parent and our love of our children and our sense of our ability to handle ourselves all come under attack. No matter what form they come in, temptations always involve some feeling of despair.

#### DIVIDING THE CAMP, TURNING TO GOD, AND SENDING GIFTS

When Jacob hears that Esau is coming he is "greatly afraid and distressed" and he desperately tries to figure out what he can possibly do. In temptation we experience a similar sense of despair and panic. "What if I never find a job again?" "What if I never am able to repair this friendship?" "What if I end up messing up my children because I'm such a bad parent?" What can we do in those situations?

Jacob does try three things: he divides the people and animals with him into two camps, He turns to God for help, and he sends generous gifts to Esau. Each of these represents something that we do when in temptation.

By this point Jacob has acquired four wives, eleven sons, one daughter, and large flocks and herds and him dividing these up is a picture of how, when we're in crisis, we rethink all that we've learned, all that we love, and all that we've experienced. Clearly something isn't working about our current approach.

When Jacob turns to God for help he reminds God of His promise to look after him and he humbles himself before God, saying, "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant" (Genesis 32:10). We pray similar prayers when we're in temptation and it's interesting that God doesn't respond to

Jacob and He doesn't seem to respond to us either. In the story, though, we can see that God is still looking after Jacob, even though he can't see it, and the same is true in our lives.

Jacob sends over five hundred and fifty animals to Esau as a present and this represents the next step after rethinking: becoming willing to give up something we care about. Jacob must have been proud of all that he had acquired but, when he realized that giving up some of his wealth might save his life, he was willing to let go of it. When we realize that giving up our need to always be right might save our relationship with our spouse, we can become willing to give it up.

### WRESTLING UNTIL THE BREAK OF DAY

When we're in temptation and we rethink things, humbly beg the Lord for help, and then let go of something we care about, we then want the temptation to be over but that's not what happens. After Jacob has done all that he can, he ends up separated from his family, wrestling with a man all night. A husband is arguing with his wife about money—she says that they really need something for their children and he says that they can't afford it. In the course of the conversation he gets really upset—enough that he's forced to rethink things and pray to the Lord for help—and eventually he decides to give up defending his point of view and try to really hear what his wife is saying and actually consider going with her point of view.

But that doesn't resolve the conflict. They still have to decide what to do and how best to do it and his wife is still upset at him and may have said some negative things about his approach to money in the heat of the moment. Throughout the continuing conversation the husband has to wrestle with the part of him that wants to lash out at his wife or totally withdraw from the conversation or make his wife feel guilty about how she's treated him.

But Jacob doesn't give in; he keeps wrestling all the way to the break of day, despite of the pain of having his hip dislocated, he still holds on until he receives a blessing. If the husband is able to hold on and stay with the conversation and not lash out or withdraw, he will eventually experience the blessings that comes as a result.

### THE BLESSING OF A NEW NAME

What is the blessing that comes out of going through temptation? A big part of it is the value of the changes that we make while undergoing temptation—the rethinking, turning to God, and letting go. We would never do those things to that extent unless we experienced some sort of crisis. Why should we rethink things, or turn to God, or let go of anything if we've got it all figured out and things are going well?

This is why the Lord allows us to experience temptations and why He allows them to go on so long. *Secrets of Heaven* 63 says “The time of conflict is when the Lord is at work... and He does not rest until love takes the lead. Then the conflict ends.” This is why the Lord doesn't listen to our prayers asking Him to immediately stop the temptation: He still

has work to do with us.

The Lord is working to give us a new name—a new spiritual quality or identity. We spend a lot of life being Jacob—a supplanter who gets what he wants by doing what he wants—but the Lord is working to turn us into Israel. In the story Jacob is named Israel because he has “struggled with God and with men, and [has] prevailed” (Genesis 32:28) but the Hebrew name can also mean “God struggles” or “God contends as a prince” and a person who is named Israel spiritually is a person who struggles as hard as they can to follow God and also acknowledges that really it is God who does the struggling for him. Israel is a person who isn’t focused on being right but on doing the right thing for the sake of other people. Israel is a person in whom love has taken the lead.

*Not only has [the Lord] Himself ‘contended as a prince,’ that is, has suffered all the conflicts brought about by temptations and has overcome in them, but also He suffers them in every individual human being. (Secrets of Heaven 4287:3).*

We can see lots of blessings in individual examples of people going through temptations. A husband who works to make it through a hard conversation about money with his wife, who is willing to rethink his approach and let go of being right, will eventually experience the blessing of getting to make up with his wife. But, more than that, he will also experience the greater blessing of emerging from that temptation with something of a new quality about him—more humble, more open to change, more loving.