

# Southern Baptist Convention Sermon

## Atlanta, Georgia, 1991

Not for release until noon, Wednesday, June 5

### "Jabbok!"

by Tom D. Elliff

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Text: "And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two women servants, and his eleven sons, and passed over the ford Jabbok. And he took them, and sent them over the brook, and sent over that he had. And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel; for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved. And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh. Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank, which is upon the hollow of the thigh, unto this day: because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew that shrank" (Genesis 32:22-32).

Each of us has a Jabbok in our future. You may be under the misconception that the stream of Jabbok is located somewhere in the Middle East where it bisects the Jordan River in its route from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. But I have discovered the Jabbok flows on every continent. Sooner or later, like Jacob, you will come to it.

For some the Jabbok will flow in the breathtaking beauty of some natural surrounding. Like Jacob, their valley will

become the setting for a mountain-top experience with only the stars as a silent witness. For most of us the Jabbok will flow underneath the door of a study, or even a hotel room, where it will join with the tears already falling on the carpet. At any rate, there is a Jabbok in your future.

Natural ability, diligently applied, can carry an individual to surprising heights of ministry in Christian circles. Hard work is so rare these days that it alone can lift a person far above the norm. People who are willing to settle down and do the job will soon have the opportunity to exchange that job for a "position."

But God, as an act of His grace, will ultimately bring us face to face with our inadequacies. God is determined to deal with spiritual emptiness, whenever and wherever he finds it in our lives. The truth will come out. Our beautiful ministerial "Tower of Pisa" will begin to lean embarrassingly.

Jacob's life, recorded in the text, is a perfect illustration of this truth. By cleverness he had obtained his brother's birthright. And then, in partnership with his mother, he had by deception stolen his brother's blessing. Running for his life, he vowed to God that he would not forget any blessing. He promised that, one day, he would return to his home and there erect an altar to God.

But what goes around comes around. For a while it appeared that Jacob had met his match in the person of his wily father-in-law. Once again, however, Jacob applied himself diligently. By dint of sheer determination, begging the blessing of God, he began to prosper—in cattle, wealth and children. Jacob was a man of unique talent, brilliant mind, strong back and a God-blessed future.

At the height of glory, frustrated by his father-in-law, Jacob returns to his homeland. Instead of a glorious welcome, word now reaches him that his brother has gathered a small army and is seeking his life. Once again Jacob goes to the well of his quick-wittedness which has so often been his ally. He sends flocks and herds of animals to appease his materialistic brother. He divides his family into two groups and sends them separate ways for their safety. Then, in a final act of desperation, he sends the family members with whom he is traveling across the Jabbok. Exhausted, he slumps to the ground with the realization that he has reached into the bag of his own human ability and pulled out the last trick.

The stars of the night are now a mute witness to a most unusual scene: Jacob is wrestling with a man. Through the night he struggles with no success. He cannot rid himself of this adversary. Who is this man who has come against him?

The answer comes in a surprising fashion. As they wrestle, the man brushes the hollow of Jacob's thigh. There is such power in that touch that his hip socket is dislocated. Just before dawn, the truth breaks across Jacob's heart. The One against Whom he had been

wrestling was none other than the Lord Himself!

The wrestling match was a picture of Jacob's life. He had sought to achieve with his cleverness, his drive. "Supplanter" was the right name for one so driven by ambition. Now Jacob clings to the Lord. Humbly, yet persistently, he petitions for a blessing. Jacob might have confessed that

Waiting's not the life that I would choose  
For, if I wait, I'm confident that I would surely lose  
the things I've dreamed about and hoped for and  
desired  
the thrill of saying "These are things I have acquired!"

No, waiting's not the life that's meant for me.  
While others wait I'll move ahead and shortly they will  
see

the kind of man I am, my cleverness, my drive  
Pursuing all my greatest dreams while still alive.

For waiting seems to be a waste of time.  
How can the man who stops and waits achieve those  
heights sublime  
from which to view the lives of those who slowly  
plod  
and only wish to see the places I'll have trod?

Ah, waiting is a sickness, don't you see?  
Afflicting young and old alike, but not the likes of me  
—except that, lately, every way I've turned is closed.  
Perhaps the secrets not in pushing on as I'd supposed.

So what's the answer for my struggling soul?  
I must confess I've just now seen it in the Book of old  
which says that all the gains and victories I've scored  
are empty, unless first I've waited on the Lord.

For those who wait on Him will find, at length,  
an even greater vision and a sure supply of strength.  
A mounting up to heights where only eagles soared  
is promised to us, if first, we wait upon the Lord.

Jacob's life was never the same after that meeting with the Lord at Jabbok. From that moment on he began to realize the full significance of doing God's work, God's way with God's power.

I am convinced that every believer's life will be marked by significant turning points and special meetings ordained to bring about radical changes. Does your heart long for such a meeting with the Lord? Have you come to the point where you know it is futile to press on without Him? There is a Jabbok in your future!

#### The Circumstances Which Call You to a Meeting with the Lord

Do any of the following properly describe you? If so, God is calling you to meet with Him.

**Desperation:** Jacob knew there were big issues at stake in

his life. Everything could be lost—his family, his fortune, his future in the place he had so longed to spend the balance of his years. He stood to lose his life and all that made his life worthwhile. This was a desperate moment for Jacob.

Is it possible that God is calling you to Himself through the desperate nature of your present circumstances? Have you been forced against a wall of your own human weakness? To use the gambler's vernacular, have you "played out your hand?" Have you reached into the bag of your own cleverness and found it empty? Have you come to the point where it is difficult to "will yourself" into pushing on? This is the kind of desperation that will call you to a meeting with the Lord.

**Destitution:** Jacob was not without material resources at this moment. But he was flat out of ideas. I remember visiting with a man who confessed to being "spiritually broke." When I asked what he meant, he replied, "I have always been able to come up with some new idea to add excitement and the appearance of success to my life. Some new project would absorb my energy and attention. It always had to be something big! Something great! Something life-changing that would capture the attention and admiration of others. I was always looking for something that had in it the promise of greatness and notoriety."

Then he continued, "Lately there is nothing I can think of which created the slightest bit of interest in my heart. I have become aware that I am great with men but not with God. I've got money in my pocket, but I'm spiritually broke!" God was calling this man to Jabbok.

**Dread:** You can smell the fear in Jacob's heart. His actions betray his panic. He dreaded the thought that he would make a wrong decision. A wrong turn at this moment would mean destruction. He might never see his family again. His fortune could be lost. All he had worked so hard to accumulate could be lost in a moment.

I am acquainted with people who dread making any major decision because they fear it will be the wrong one. They feel as if, any moment, they might lose their family, their work, their ministry or their faith. When you speak to them about the bright prospects of the future, they grimace. With pursed lips, a furrowed brow and a pensive look, they will tell you things aren't looking so well. These folks, paralyzed by fear, need a meeting with the Lord.

**Demand:** Jacob was under pressure to make a decision. The clock was ticking. This was no time to tread water or run in place. At daybreak his brother would be dangerously close. He did not have another night, much less another day, to make his decision.

If you have no other agenda, life will push you into moments like this. These are "deadline" moments. Decisions must be made. The failure to decide simply gives others the power to decide for us. They will call the shots. They will take charge. People in these situations are often heard to complain that, "My life is out of control! I have no time of my own! My frantic pace scarcely allows me time to breathe!" If you can identify with this, there is no time to waste. You need a meeting with the Lord at your Jabbok.

Permit this one final observation: It is easy to see why

such meetings with the Lord often occur in the more mature stages of our spiritual pilgrimage. Those are the times when the stakes are often the highest. There is no more to lose. The pressure is greatest. And recovery from the devastating effects of a wrong decision seem the least likely. In reality, these are the years when the rippling waters of Jabbok are heard most clearly.

### **The Conduct Which Characterizes Your Meeting with the Lord**

Over the years, I have developed an appreciation for the biographies of great Christians. Inevitably, as I begin reading, there is this question in my mind: What is this person's secret? I am searching for what it is that distinguishes this individual's walk with God from the commonplace. I am often surprised with just how much they have in common. This is especially evident in their records of those special meetings with God. Their "Jabboks" are quite similar to Jacob's. In particular, there are three characteristics which stand out.

**Resistance:** "And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day." Here Jacob is resisting the control of the Lord, doing all he can to insure that the man with whom he wrestles does not gain the mastery of him.

Our meetings with the Lord generally begin with a similar resistance. While we intellectually agree that the Lord knows best, there is still something in our heart which rebels against His control. We are committed to our own way, pressing forward with dogged determination, attempting to show ourselves quite capable of managing our own lives.

The Lord, of course, could literally have crushed Jacob at any moment. But he was not, and is not, interested in mastering our lives by force. Occasionally, as in the case of Jacob, His power will so brush against our lives that we sense its magnitude. But the issue is a willing surrender! There is this question: Will you totally surrender everything to Him? This is a surrender which involves ambitions, position, family, friends...everything! No wonder our first response is so often that of resistance.

**Revelation:** "And when He saw that He prevailed not against him, He touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint as he wrestled with Him." In this momentary brush with the power of the Lord, Jacob suddenly became aware of whom he was resisting. At that point, the struggle assumed a totally different nature. Now it is the Lord who says, "Let me go for the day breaketh!" Jacob is clinging fiercely to Him. Having seen Christ, Jacob now has no desire to let Him go. His entire life turns on this revelation!

Our Lord promised that the pure in heart would "see God." It is interesting to note that, in our struggles, we often come to a position of such earnestness that we suddenly see Him. A friend of mine once stated that "desperation" generally precedes "revelation." Jacob would agree!

**Request:** When Jacob saw the Lord, he realized what utter

folly it was to resist Him. In fact, he now refuses to allow the meeting to pass without making two specific requests:

First, he sought the blessing of the Lord. "I will not let thee go, unless thou bless me." I often wonder if we realize the significance of God's blessing on our lives. When all the truths regarding God's "blessing" are reduced to their most simply form, here is what you will discover: The blessing of God is a sovereign act by which He causes someone, or something, to supernaturally produce more than is naturally possible.

I visited with a former prisoner of war who stated that it was the blessing of God which kept him alive with a diet on which many of his friends died. He said, "I prayed that God would bless the meager rations and make it like steak and potatoes to my body."

Isn't that your desire? When we pray "God bless that missionary," are we not asking the Lord to so empower him that he will do more than a mere man can do? When we ask God to bless the offering, are we not asking him to superintend the money that dollars do more than dollars normally do? Is this not your desire: To have God's blessing upon your life?

But pay close attention to Jacob's second request. "Tell me, I pray thee, thy name." Jacob is saying, "I want to know you!" Having the blessing of God on your life is one thing; knowing the "Blessor" is another. When Moses pled for Israel on Mount Sinai, his request was for more than protection, direction or sustenance. Listen to his words: "If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up from here. For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? It is not that thou goest with us?"

Moses knew we could have God's provision without His presence. But he considered the presence of the Lord as the absolute essential. Paul identified his magnificent obsession as "knowing" Christ. **THE CHIEF CHARACTERISTIC OF JABBOK IS THAT JACOB'S GREAT DESIRE BECAME THAT OF WALKING IN UNHINDERED FELLOWSHIP WITH THE LORD.**

### **The Consequences Which Come from Your Meeting with the Lord**

Some years ago, I heard a seminary professor remark that "A person may be religious and lost but, he cannot be saved without being changed." In fact, anyone who has a meeting with the Lord, at whatever stage of his spiritual pilgrimage, will be genuinely changed. If you have been to Jabbok there will be certain evidences:

**A New Description:** Jacob was given a new name as a result of his meeting with the Lord. "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: For as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed." Just as the different names of God reveal differing aspects of His personality, so Jacob's new name revealed something about his new nature. Abram became Abraham; Saul became Paul; new Jacob the supplanter became Israel the prince.

When we meet with the Lord, our lives will manifest the

difference. I read of a man whose punishment for killing a man in a bar room brawl was to have the man's initials, "G.M." tattooed on his forehead. In latter years he was converted to Christ and subsequently became characterized by a humble life of total surrender to God. Once two young boys were discussing the meaning of the initials on his forehead. "I'm not sure what it means," said one of the boys, "But I think it stands for God's Man!"

You may be discouraged with how you are "known" these days. Perhaps it is because of events, past or present, over which you have no control. Or perhaps your reputation is sullied by deliberate sin and failure. No matter! Go to Jabbok! Meet with the Lord! An in the balance of your years He will impress upon your life a new description.

**A New Direction:** Jacob now began to carry out the plan of God for his life by the power of God in his life. That God had a great plan for his life had never been in question. God had revealed this to his parents from the beginning. Jacob had sensed it in the earliest years of his development. But how was Jacob to carry out that plan? Until Jabbok Jacob had sought to wrestle God's favor and blessing from a worldly environment by skill and cleverness. Ambition had been a driving force in his life. He determined not to be denied whatever he desired. But now as Israel he saw that it must be God's plan accomplished by God's power.

Your meeting with God can become as transforming as Jacob's. Perhaps, like Jacob, you have never doubted that God has a wonderful plan for your life. Maybe you have even sought to cooperate with Him in achieving the goals you have set. You may have agreed with Him on the great crucial issues of your life. But, somewhere along the way, you began to operate with your cleverness and drive. Jabbok will change all of that! There you will discover God's direction. And you can forge ahead with His power.

**A New Devotion:** From this moment on, Jacob would never place God in a cubbyhole as before. In fact, Jacob named the place where he wrestled with the Lord, "Peniel: for I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved." He realized that his Lord held sway over life and death.

Jacob would never be a perfect man. Sometimes we see him acting more as Jacob; at other times we see him acting more as Israel. (Simon Peter experienced the same!) But there is a new devotion in his life. One of his first responses is to erect an altar to the God who is the God of Israel.

It is worthy of note that Jacob's new description, direction

and devotion did NOT mean he was immediately relieved from the consequences of his past activities. His sons, for instance, had watched too much of the old Jacob. Once back in Canaan they evidenced so much sin that God had to remove them (and their descendants) to Egypt for a four hundred year period of purification. But through all this, God honored Jacob's devotion and fulfilled His plan through his children.

**A New Difference:** Jacob bore an actual, physical reminder of his meeting with the Lord. "As he passed over Peniel, the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh." His withered sinew became to him the same as Paul's "brandmarks"...reminders of God's ownership.

People who have met with the Lord and surrendered to Him are marked for life. I can envision Jacob's last few years. You recall that before his death, Jacob was brought face to face with his son Joseph whom he thought had been killed. This reunion took place in Egypt where Joseph had risen to power. Jacob's family was gathered there to enjoy provision and protection during a time of famine.

Picture Jacob as an old man, surrounded by grand children and great-grandchildren as he shuffles from the door of his house. They are begging him to tell a story. "Tell us," they insist, "about what happened to cause your limp." Settling himself comfortably, Jacob gathers the children around him, and says, "Well, it all began when I had a meeting with the Lord...."

Perhaps you have had such a meeting with the Lord. Perhaps you have arrived here with the "brandmarks" which indicate that you have just recently come from Jabbok. But if you just happen to have arrived with a sense of desperation; if you have reached into the bag of your human ability for the last time; if you are at a crossroads where the wrong turn could mean disaster; if you are weary of treading water; if you have concluded it is impossible to recover from the mistakes of the past; if you have long since stopped burning the oil of the Spirit and feel you are burning up the wick of your life...then I would suggest that, before the sun goes down, you find a place to get alone and listen for the rippling waters of the Jabbok.

Before the sun comes up tomorrow you can have a new description, a new direction and a new devotion in your life. You may walk into this room with such a new difference that it will be obvious to others...you have met the Lord at Jabbok!