

# ***“Wrestling”***

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***God's expecting you to fight back in the strength he gives you.***

***Genesis 32:22-32***

***November 5, 2017***

***Really sorry and really afraid***

After a short break to ponder the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, we return to our studies in Genesis, specifically to the second of two sermons on Jacob. Here's a little fact I bet you didn't know – at least I didn't: The name “Jacob” appears more often in the Bible than “Abram/Abraham.” Jacob is arguably the most pivotal patriarch, with his story spanning half of Genesis (chapters 25-50).

When we last left Jacob, at about 40 years old he was running away from his twin brother Esau – and for good reason. He had connived with his mother to steal Esau's rights as the firstborn son. Esau had determined to kill him. Jacob slipped away, terrified, and on the way out of town had a surprising encounter with God – a vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder (or ziggurat). In that vision God promised to bring Jacob back home and to bless him with innumerable descendants. Jacob awoke and declared, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it” (28:16).

Jacob has been gone twenty years. While away he married sisters and fathered twelve children – eleven sons and one daughter. He's decided to return home, but he's very anxious about seeing Esau again. On his way back he meets angels again and says, “This is the camp of God” (32:2). He sends messengers ahead to meet Esau, and learns that Esau is coming toward him with a small army – 400 men (32:6). This causes “great fear and distress” (32:7) to Jacob and he prays the longest prayer recorded in Genesis (32:9-12). His prayer confesses his fear and reminds God of that promise 20 years ago to prosper him and increase his descendants. The next day he sends a colossal peace gift to his brother. It's comparable to offending your wife and instead of giving her a bouquet of flowers you give her a BMW, four gold necklaces, twelve diamond pendants, and a mansion. He's really sorry, and really afraid. This brings us to Genesis 32:22-32.

### ***The brawl (22-25)***

*That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.*

The story teller wants you to experience both Jacob's fear and his confusion. Why did Jacob want to be alone? Whom did he wrestle? Why was Jacob wounded?

On his way to meet Esau, Jacob had already divided his flocks and people in two, sending them in different directions so if Esau attacked he would only destroy half of them (7-8). He then sent a good number of his possessions ahead to Esau as a gift to appease him (13-21). As night fell, he even sent his family over the river Jabbok. This is a tributary of the Jordan, flowing west through a deep ravine. To ford the river at night with women, children, and flocks would itself have presented great challenges.

"Jacob was left alone" (24). It's the same word used in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for the man to be alone." Jacob may have been protecting his family. If Esau and his men approached they could say, "Jacob's not here." On the other hand, he may have been protecting himself, using the movement of the large group as a diversion.

Either way, his solitude in the darkness sets us up for what happens next. Someone identified only as "a man" wrestles with him all night (24). I don't know what kind of physical wrestling match you've been involved with, but wrestling is almost always short-lived. Five minutes will exhaust one or the other or both combatants. Jacob is my age – 60 or a little more. Something strange is happening here.

In the darkness Jacob probably thinks he is wrestling Esau, or maybe someone Esau has sent to kill him. He believes he is in a life and death struggle. Picture two sweaty men using body slams, holds, locks, reverses, take downs, flips, and flops. Toward morning, the narrator says the man "touched" the socket of Jacob's hip (25). The Hebrew word can be translated "struck." He delivered a blow – not fatal, but powerful and painful.

### ***The conversation (26-29)***

*Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."*

*But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."*

*The man asked him, "What is your name?"*

*"Jacob," he answered.*

*Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."*

*Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."*

*But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.*

Still locked in a breathless but adversarial hold, the two men have a conversation. Three brief conversations, really.

The stranger says, "Let me go," and Jacob answers, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (26). At some point during the long night's struggle Jacob has come to realize this is not Esau, maybe not even a mortal. At the very least, one pleads for a blessing from someone you consider greater.

The stranger then asks Jacob, "What is your name?" (27). Names are so significant, especially in this culture where names have meaning. In any culture, to know someone's name makes the relationship personal and intimate. It may even indicate some degree of control or at least predictability. Here the idea is not that the stranger doesn't know. He's asking, "Do you know who you are?" As we said a few weeks ago, Jacob's name means "Liar." Jacob has spent his whole 60 years trying to prove that he was as good as or better than his brother – and he would connive and deceive to prove it. That's been his identity.

The stranger renames Jacob (28). From now on, he will be called "Israel." The exact etymology and meaning of this name has been disputed, but it has two parts – "Struggle" and "God." It can mean, "He struggles against God" or "God struggles along side him" or "God struggles against him." From now on, Jacob and his people will not have Deceit as their identity. They will be known by their struggle.

Remember that this part of the Bible is, at least in large part, written by Moses for Moses' generation – that generation that emerged from slavery in Egypt and languished in the desert for forty years before entering the Promised Land. Moses needs to remind them out in the wilderness that their very identity as a people is one of struggle – against and with God. This fight isn't just about Jacob. Walter Brueggemann says, "Israel is not formed by success or shrewdness or land, but by an assault from God. Perhaps it is grace, but not the kind usually imagined" (*Genesis*, 269).

I said in a couple of Bible studies this week that this story of Jacob wrestling with God is not referenced elsewhere in the Bible. Actually, it is – once. Hosea chapter 12 has a rather extensive commentary on this passage. The accusation from Hosea is that God's unfaithful people are repeating the deception of Jacob and God is once again wrestling with them to bring them back to him.

One person in my Bible study, however, noted that every time we encounter the name “Israel” in Scripture it’s a reference back to Jacob wrestling. The very identity of God’s people is to be an ongoing struggle. Jacob is truly changed in this nighttime encounter with God. He stops deceiving and conniving. But he doesn’t stop struggling. The rest of his life will be full of struggle, especially around the loss of his son Joseph, the famine that follows, and the movement of his entire clan to Egypt. His life is a metaphor for struggle, and the struggle will be the entire story of God’s people.

Having revealed his name and having it changed, Jacob then initiates the third part of the conversation. “What’s your name?” he asks the stranger. The only answer he gets is a question: “Why do you want to know my name?” Remember, knowing someone’s name creates intimacy, but it also creates predictability, as in, “Now that I know who you are, I know what you’re going to do.” This stranger will not allow Jacob (now Israel) the illusion of that kind of power. He’s going to leave his name unknown. But he still blesses Jacob (29)

### ***The reflection (30-32)***

*So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”*

*The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob’s hip was touched near the tendon.*

When Jacob had encountered God at Bethel, it was in a dream. The next morning, he realized this all-night fight was no dream. He was still limping. He had indeed encountered God. He had fought with God. Whether this was Yahweh, or the pre-incarnate Jesus, or an angel, doesn’t matter and we’re not told. Jacob fought God.

The name “Peniel” means “face of God.” This place is to be remembered permanently as the place that changed what it means to meet God face to face. Jews see this name change as not only their permission but their need to argue with God.<sup>1</sup> One way to seal the memory of this event in Jewish consciousness is dietary. *The Jewish Book of Why* (94) asks, “Why are steaks served in kosher restaurants not as good?” The answer is that the best steaks come from the hind quarter, but that’s where the sciatic nerves runs through the hip socket. So kosher butchers sell that part of the animal to the general market.

One can get too caught up in the meat or other specifics. The story is here because Jacob is never the same man again, nor are his people. And we, even though we are not Jews, should change how we look on our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, 40.

## ***Leading with a limp***

*First, the essence of life is struggle.* Why is that so hard to grasp, so hard to remember? Genesis is a book of beginnings, and one of the first beginnings is the beginning of labor pains and of toil as the result of sin. In a fallen world, from the beginning we learn that it is best for us to struggle. We keep thinking, “If I could just heal this pain, manage this stress, solve this problem, reconcile this relationship, I would be so much better off.” No, I wouldn’t. Bodies are designed to hurt, marriage is supposed to be hard, work is designed for trouble, pressure is normal. If your experience is different, it’s unusual – and probably temporary.

We’ve all heard this applied to butterflies emerging from the cocoon, or doctors subjected to the ardors of training, or steel forged in heat, or soldiers going through boot camp. Somehow we think the wrestling is supposed to be one-and-done. We forget what Job said, “Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7) or what Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). Wrestling is lifelong, and it always has purpose. God is using the struggle to change us.

Well, what about those who die – parents, friends, spouses, children? What purpose can their suffering have if it leads to death? The ultimate suffering of this life ushers us into the world to come where, as the Heidelberg Catechism says, “death puts an end to our sinning.” The struggle for them is over. The grief we have is part of our ongoing struggle. Some unarguably face so much more suffering than others. But it’s a matter of degree only. It may not look like it on the surface, but the life of every person is a life of suffering in some degree. We are all “Israel,” one who struggles with God.

*God is both adversary and friend.* This part of what I’m going to say will be hard for some. If this troubles you, I understand. A challenge of preaching is speaking to a broad spectrum of people in terms of where they are emotionally and spiritually.

John Calvin is rightly remembered as articulating the absolute sovereignty of God over all things, not only what’s good but what’s bad. Calvin says that the answer to the hard question is yes, God himself is behind the struggles that we face. “Adversity is either the rod with which he corrects our sins or a test of our faith and patience.”

Calvin describes our struggles as a fight against God who initiated the brawl.

To attempt any kind of contest with (God) would be reckless contempt. But it is easy to untie this knot, for we do not fight against him except by his own power and with his own weapons. For God, having challenged us to this contest, at the same time furnishes us with the means to resist, so that he fights *against* us and *for* us. In short, he arranged the conflict in such a way that while he attacks us

with one hand, he defends us with the other. He supplies us with more strength to resist than he uses to attack us.<sup>2</sup>

This is God, fighting with Jacob as he fights with us. But as Calvin says, at the same time he is our enemy, he is our advocate and our strength – our best friend. What’s happening here is setting us up for the ultimate display of God’s grace on the cross – the voluntary weakening of God so that man might “win” – and in that victory of man over God in the struggle we might be saved.

*Finally, our wounds equip us to serve and lead.* Dan Allender has written a book titled *Leading with a Limp*, based on this passage. He starts out by reminding us that fear, narcissism, and addiction are common in those with a desire to lead. Real common. As common as breathing. He says that leadership training in the world usually involved content – teaching the right theories and skills. Inadvertently (we hope, anyway), the leadership training is simply reinforcing the centrality of power, ambition, and pride. That’s not how God prepares leaders. God gives leaders new life, but so much more.

God prepares leaders through failure (Moses), loneliness (Elijah), betrayal (David), weariness (Paul), and injury (Jacob). I looked at someone this week who’s gone through infidelity and separation and defeat – his own failure and that of others – and said, “I can see you as a strong leader in another five or ten years.” Wrestling is the raw material out of which God forges change agents.

My short study on Jacob’s life has convinced me that he gets short-changed in the minds of most Bible readers. Like so many others we encounter every day, we dismiss him because of his beginning. He started poorly, and that’s what we remember about him. He deceived, he stole, he ran. Yes, he did. But God also chose him as the consummate patriarch. The man who lived the rest of his life with a limp because God had hurt him became the pivotal character, the very identity of Israel, which means to struggle with God.

I don’t pretend to know what God’s doing in your life. If it involves some form of suffering – a physical pain that nags you, a person who keeps letting you down, a dream that won’t die but won’t come to pass, a grief that breaks your heart every day, I can almost guarantee you’re chafing against it. When you do, you’re wrestling with God. That’s not a bad thing. He’s expecting you to fight back in the strength he gives you.

It’s also certain that you’ll come out of the brawl with a limp, a limp that will make you stronger and wiser and more grace-filled as you serve and lead others. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *Genesis*, 272.