

Jacob Wrestles with the Angel

Our second reading is Genesis 32:22-32. Today we take a second look at Jacob, the grandson of Abraham and son of Isaac. Two Sundays ago, we noted that he had cheated his twin brother Esau out of his birthright and blessing, and had to flee for his life to Haran, home of his Uncle Laban. At the outset of this 500-mile journey, Jacob was intercepted by God through a dream at Luz, which he renamed Bethel, "The House of God." This revelation of Jacob's ladder was Jacob's first encounter with God, his conversion experience that brought him into a relationship with God. And so on to Haran he journeyed, where he met his uncle, and subsequently his wives, Leah and Rachel. Perhaps you're familiar with the intriguing story of Jacob's sojourn in Haran, who, as a conniver and deceiver, met his match in his Uncle Laban, who tricked him into marrying Leah before he was able to earn the right to marry his beloved Rachel. And perhaps you know how that in Haran Jacob had his 11 sons through his two wives and their two handmaidens. After twenty years of rivalry with his uncle, Jacob managed to leave Haran as a wealthy man, but knew that now, to return to the land of promise, he would have to face his estranged, and as far as he knew, still angry brother, Esau.

In this condition of desperate fear at the prospect of facing Esau, who was approaching him with an army of 400 men, Jacob was about to experience another life-changing encounter. He sends his family and possessions ahead, perhaps as a buffer between himself and Esau, and is very much alone where he meets God through the medium of an angel.

Follow as I read **Genesis 32:22-32**:

²² The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Have you ever seen a wrestling match? Not like the theatrical performances on television, where these overweight play-actors, through each other out of the ring and do all sorts of fabricated violence to their opponents. But real scholastic, collegiate and Olympic-style wrestling is a demanding and excruciatingly difficult sport, I can tell you first hand!

Our text describes Jacob in an all-night wrestling match and against a formidable opponent indeed! He wrestled with God, through his angel representative. This strange experience, a “God-appearing,” was the event that prepared him to face his brother Esau and also to provide leadership for his family in the years ahead. Without this, he would have been unprepared for his latter years and would have been unable to bless his sons and future generations of the people of God. We all must experience our struggles with God as well. Just as for Jacob, there are issues in our lives that must be wrestled with to prepare us for life and eternity.

Jacob’s life before this struggle was less than glorious. In fact, Jacob’s life was so unworthy of a child of God that Paul uses him as an example of how God’s elective choice of his recipients of grace is totally apart from our deserving or merit (Rom. 9:10-18). The name of Jacob, who came out of the womb after his twin brother, Esau, means “he grasps the heel,” or figuratively, “he deceives.” And Jacob lived up to his name, cheating his brother and deceiving his father. And, even after his experience with God at the revelation of Jacob’s ladder, he continued to be a self-willed, self-reliant striver. Just as is true for all of us, after his coming into a relationship with God, Jacob often faltered in faith and failed to walk in step with God. This was obvious in his striving with his father-in-law, and in his conduct with his own family. And looming over his life was the still broken relationship with his brother, which was the cause of Jacob’s fearful anticipation of meeting him upon his return to Canaan.

The Christian life is all about relationships—with God and with others. God’s great gift to us is his forgiveness, which establishes our relationship with him. Although a genuine relationship with Christ cannot be broken, it can be interrupted by unforgiven sin and by broken relationships with others. This is why Jesus taught us to pray for forgiveness and John wrote about the need to daily confess our sins (Matt. 6:12; 1 Jn. 1:9). Our broken relationships disturb our peace with God, who will not forgive us if we close our hearts to reconciliation with our brothers and sisters (Matt. 6:14-15).

Jacob had been converted at Bethel (Gen. 32), but apparently had not been walking with God since the time he had been in Haran with his Uncle Laban. His attitudes and decisions seemed to be shaped by pride and self-will. Like so many of us, Jacob knew the Lord but was living the life of a “practical atheist,” forfeiting the spiritual growth and blessings that could have been his. Jacob’s goals and obsessions had become materialistic, vying and arguing with his father-in-law, who seems to have been quite his match as a trickster and

deceiver. When we find Jacob in our text, he's a restless and fearful man in need of God's peace and rest.

Quite obviously, Jacob is unprepared to face his brother, Esau. He's fearful of his approaching army, knowing that he and his family are in danger of his vengeance. Jacob also was not prepared to enter Canaan and to take his appointed place as a spiritual leader of his family. Similarly, God may well see that many of us here today are unprepared to face what lies ahead of us, and so he is calling us into a time of spiritual struggle with him. God's objective is always for his glory and for our everlasting good. And he will prepare us for our future challenges and opportunities as well as for our everlasting reward and life with him in heaven.

After he sent his family and servants ahead of him, Jacob was left alone (24). So many are afraid of being alone before God, and yet one of our greatest needs is solitude. Sometimes it takes a crisis to reduce us to inactivity and silence before God. There are some who are prepared to listen to God only when reduced to lying on their backs in a hospital or convalescence bed. There's no more lonely experience than being on a wrestling mat, where no one else is responsible for victory or defeat. And thus when God wrestles with us he has us all to himself!

As CS Lewis argues in *The Problem of Pain*, the love of God requires that he not leave us alone to our natural sinful impulses, but to engage with us in such a way as to improve our character and our usefulness to him. Lewis contends that our impulse is to want not a Father in heaven, but rather an indulgent "grandfather," whose only desire for us is that we enjoy ourselves. But God's love, says Lewis, "is something more stern and splendid than mere kindness." God, like a formidable wrestler, takes hold of us to fulfill his purposes in us. This perhaps is what Paul had in mind when he wrote, "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil. 3:12). Paul knew that Christ took hold of his life and would not let him go until Paul's purpose became Christ's.

It took a nighttime of struggle for God to do what needed to be done in Jacob's life. Jacob was a proud, stubborn and strong man, and he was determined to win against God and his representative angel. No doubt he wanted God's blessings, but Jacob wanted them on his terms and not on God's. Jacob was a natural striver, and he was usually successful. But he needed to become broken to his pride and self-will and accept blessings on God's terms. God struck the socket of Jacob's hip, and crippled him, breaking his strength. We're no match for God's power. He can strike a blow that breaks us free from pride and self-reliance. Jacob became a cripple for life, forever reminded of his dependence on God (Maybe that's why I have a limp from my arthritic hip).

Jacob came into this struggle with all that he had gained and had made of himself, including his pride, and God touched and broke him to a point of full surrender. He found himself in a desperate situation, and during that night of

travail with God he learned that from now on he would have to submit his stubborn will to God and begin to do things God's way. When God touched and crippled him, he gave Jacob a present and permanent reminder of the weakness of his flesh and his need from now on to depend absolutely upon God. For the rest of his life Jacob had to walk leaning on a stick (Packer). In this time of surrender, Jacob now for the first time came to hate his own cleverness and schemes. And now that God had broken him to self and had broken away from him his affection for his idols, Jacob now desired to be blessed God's way. He was now humble and dependent enough to be blessed.

Now Jacob was in a position to see God (30). He had, during this struggle, come to a position of surrender and death to self-will, and now his desire was to hold to God for his blessing, which resulted in his seeing God through his angelic messenger, this divine wrestler! Jacob named this place Peniel, which means "face of God." I can testify that my greatest spiritual growth has occurred during times of trial and testing. During the struggle we may think life is coming apart at the seams. But God is possibly doing his greatest work in us, as he was in Jacob's life. And when God works in us, we come through the ordeal with a clearer perception of the character and glory of God. There are some truths about God we will never learn until we experience a season of wrestling with God. Our greatest spiritual growth takes place during times of suffering and struggle, when we learn to hold on to God by faith, because during those times our faith is all we have to rely upon.

Jacob was a new person, indicated by his name change. Jacob, which means "he deceives", is renamed by God Israel, "one who strives with God" (28), with a permanent limp to remind him of his spiritual broken-ness and absolute reliance on God and his need to walk in his natural weakness, dependent on God's supernatural power. There are victories far worse than defeats, and sometimes the best thing that can happen to us is to experience defeat, to bring us to the end of self-will and pride. Jacob is now a broken yet new person, prepared to face his brother and whatever God might have for him. Before the struggle, Jacob was a divided, conflicted and fearful man. Now he was broken, healed and prepared. As one has said, Jacob came low enough for God to raise him up by speaking peace to him and assuring him that he need not fear about Esau anymore. Jacob now had the peace and rest of God that would prepare him for the hours and even the years ahead. Packer points out, Jacob "did not become a plaster saint overnight; he was not completely straight with Esau the next day (33:14-17); but in principle God had won his battle with Jacob, and won it for good. Limping Jacob had learned his lesson. The wisdom of God had done its work." Jacob was now more completely God's person, available and trustworthy.

Before this struggle, Jacob was a striver—striving after obtaining things and his own way. But after this struggle he seems to have become a man of peace, obtaining spiritual rest. He needed to find "The Promised Land" in his own heart before he could re-enter the land of promise, Canaan. After the struggle with

God, he had rest in God. And God desires the same salvation rest for us. Like Jacob, we need also to more fully enter the rest of living in God's peace, as we relinquish striving for a God's approval, our ambitions, and for temporal objectives. After his struggle with God, material things no longer had a grip on Jacob, who was ready to relinquish them to Esau (33:10-11). Jacob was no longer a striver, trying to get for himself, performing for God, and getting things from God, and doing things for God. Now he's a broken person, able only in his weakness to trust God, who made him into a new person with a new name.

I've been through a struggle with God represented by my counselor, who has led me to confront my need to no longer strive for spiritual perfection, which leads to frustration, but just to hold onto the grace of God. Maybe you're in the midst of a bout with God. Just hold onto his love.

When I was a kid, I got into some wrestling bouts with guys more than my match. And we had a cry that signaled our surrender. We cried "uncle"! You may be in the midst of wrestling with God. Just hold on in tenacious trust. But maybe it's time to yell "Uncle!" and surrender.