

**“They Who Wrestle with God” | Genesis 32
(He Who Wrestles with God: A Study of the Life of Jacob)**

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(Small Group Discussion Questions on Page 7)

We have been considering the life of Jacob this winter. Today we come to a Rubicon, a turning point, a Damascus’s Road experience—we come to Jacob’s night of wrestling with God, when was given a new name, Israel. It is found in Genesis 32:22-32.

The events leading up to it build in suspense, like on rock on top of another. Jacob has left (fled, even) Paddan Aram (Northern Mesopotamia), where he spent the past two decades. He is making the 400 mile journey south, back to his father’s house, back to Cana. He camps just outside the promise land, and we begin to see that his way back home seems barred by his conflict with Esau, his brother. They have not seen each other for twenty years, since the day Jacob deceived his father and stole Esau’s blessing. The last Jacob heard of Esau was him breathing threats that he would murder him.

So Jacob does what Jacob doe: he acts shrewdly, trying to pacify his brother before they meet. First, he sends messengers to tell Esau he’s coming (32:3). But they return only to tell Jacob that Esau **“is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him”** (32:6). You only travel with four hundred men when you go to war. Next, he sends a present, over 500 animals (32:13-15), and reminds his servants to speak deferentially to Esau. When he asks where these gifts come from, they are to respond: **“These “belong to your *servant* Jacob,” “they are a present sent to *my Lord* Esau”** (32:17-18). His motives come to the fore in v 20, **“I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me”** (32:20).

But Jacob is afraid, and has entered into a long night. And he cannot sleep, so he gets up in agitation. And this is where our scene picks up:

The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. ²⁴ And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day (32:22-24).

I don’t know if you’ve ever felt like God was fighting you—striving against you, breaking you down. I don’t know if you’ve ever felt like you wanted to fight God—furious with the way He’s let your life go. Or maybe you’re fighting so many different things—family, friends, the world, yourself—and don’t even realize that your actually raging against God.

Whatever the case, pay close attention to what is about to happen next, for it is *the conflict you must face, if you ever want to get home—the conflict you must face, if you ever want reconciliation with Esau*. Since we were banned from Eden because of our sin, conflicts abound around us. But at bottom, it is a conflict with God that bars our way back to Eden, and this is exactly what Jacob must now face. He must fight with God in order to see that God is fighting for him.

Consider how the match unfolds in three movements: (1) The Deeper Fight, (2) The Merciful Defeat, (3) The New Man.

I. The Deeper Fight

Jacob's conflict with Esau is real, but the timing of his assailment by the Jabbok suggest there is a deeper conflict he must face first, as does the setting.

Alone: God gets Jakob totally alone—he takes his family and possession across the ford of the Jabbok, and, verse 24, “Jacob is left alone.”

Not Sure: And with it being night, he does not know who the man is who attacks him. As the passage explains, Jacob does not start the fight, but is attacked, and by a mysterious figure the passage simply calls a man: “Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day” (v24).

It was God: Only after the battle, will he realize he had been engaged that night with the Divine: “I have seen God face to face and yet my life has been delivered” (32:20).

God is path to Esau: What is particularly interesting, is that later, when Jacob is reconciled with Esau, he uses almost the same phrase to described the reunion: “Jacob said to Esau... I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God and you have accepted me” (33:10).

The point seems to be this: *Underneath Jacob's conflict with Esau, is his conflict with God—that is the deeper fight. And he must face it first, or he will never be able to face Esau.*

Our Fight with God

And was not Jacob fighting with God all along? His frustration with his birth order, wanting the privileges that comes with being the firstborn, this was not Esau's fault. Providence lies behind it. And his manipulation of his father, this was more than an affront against his family, it was a sin affront to God. He did not trust God. And in not respecting those made in the image of God, he would not respect God.

E.g., Counselors. Sometimes counselors, when they are working with someone on a problem the person has, will help them see that there is something deeper they need to deal with. “Do you think your frustration with your boss, or spouse, might have something to do with your relationship with your mom, or dad?”

The Bible does something like this. It helps us see that behind our conflicts, lies a deeper conflict, our conflict with God. And this is not to minimize the strained relationships between Jacobs and Esaus. It is simply to say that without reconciliation with God, we cannot have full reconciliation with each other.

Apply: Consider some of the issues you may have. Frustrations with family, co-workers. Frustrations with life in general, or with the world. Frustrations with yourself. If you look hard enough, can you see where things lead back to your relationship with God?

- How your attitude toward others, has in it a deep conflict with God—who made them in his image and calls you to love your neighbor and enemy?
- How your own hurt and pain, may actually indicate that are mad at God—perhaps you’d like to fight him because of the way life has gone, but you’re afraid to admit it.
- King David, after his sin against Bathsheba, must recognize that has actually sinned against God: “Against you, O Lord, have I sinned and done what was evil in your sight” (Ps 51).
- And the Psalmists, so frustrated with life and injustice, must recognize that they are also—perhaps more deeply so—frustrated with God: How long O Lord? Why do you stand far off? “Why do the wicked prosper? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps 10:1).

Whether it is our need for forgiveness and mercy, or our need for understanding and help, Jacob’s engagement at the Jabbok reminds us that our deepest fight is with God. So before you tarry too long in you anger at another, bring that attitude before God to be dealt with. And before you tarry to long in your anger at the world, bring that frustration honestly before God—and have it out if you need to. God can handle it—just like he handles Jacob.

Sum: Here then is the first lesson from Jacob’s night’s long bout with the Divine: *many conflicts and issues we have, but our true fight is with God. Engage him!*

[T] That’s the deeper fight. Next, consider why this is a merciful defeat.

II. The Merciful Defeat (25-27)

Text: Picking up at verse 25: “And the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob.” Our patriarch appears to be winning. Perhaps we should not be surprised. Jacob always proves a force to reckon with. He defeated Esau, dupped his Father, and got the best of his uncle, Laban. Jacob’s story, up to this point, has been one where he always finds a way to win—and by his own strength.

And the Jacobs of this world do win. They are not outright evil. Rather, they are shrewd. The Jacobs of this world are ambitious people who are strong on smarts and guts but weak on conscience.¹ And here is the thing: in this world, they win.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, 15.

And this seems to be exactly what our mysterious assailant wants to bait Jacob into—flexing his own muscles. And why? Because God must allow Jacob to exert all his strength and nearly win, so that when he is defeated, he knows he is truly defeated. Jacob must be broken in his strength.

And this turns out to be exactly what the assailant is doing—he’s been toying with Jacob to expose Jacob. And with a touch, just a touch, he reveals who has the upper hand:

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him (32:25).

E.g., As a kid we drove out to Western PA to see my Grandparents at Thanksgiving. I along with my many cousins, loved the greeting we got from Grandpap as we neared the front door. He’d extend his strong arm and big hand with a big grin, and we’d engage in the traditional handshake. We’d exert all our strength and let out a wince, only to then give us a slight squeeze that nearly sent us keeling over. Our strength swallowed up by his.

That’s how this scene feels to me. God has let Jacob spend his strength, but then with a touch—again, just a touch—he lets Jacob feel the slightest bit of his own. And now we can begin to discern a bit more about God’s motivation in all this—he has come to transform Jacob, and it can only happen by defeating him.

Jacob asks, but in desperation

And notice what happens. Jacob, forever the grasper, won’t let go, even with the broken hip: “Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the day has broken.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not unless you bless me.’” (32:26). Jacob asks, but in desperation. The one who grasps still grasps, but now as a man who is drowning. And notice what the mysterious assailant does next:

Jacob must confess who he is:

And notice that Jacob is now exposed—he must state his own name: “And he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’” (v27). This act of stating his name is far more profoundly a confession: I am Jacob, “supplanter,” “heel catcher,” the deceiver: It’s as Esau said: “Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times” (Gen 27:36).

Picture of Salvation:

Can we not see here a picture of salvation. God condescends to come to us, lets us beat him, think him weak, even crucify him. But it has all been his way of drawing close to us. And he uses the gentlest means possible—just a touch—to dislocate something in our life. And he brings us then to a place of owning who we are: “I am Jacob. These are the things I have done. This the person that I am.” We lie helpless and naked before him. And then what does he do? He blesses us, verse 29: “And there he blessed him.”

Non-Christian

Friend, if you have never heard the Good News about Jesus before, you have here before a foreshadowing of it. God has come to us as a man. He has engaged us in all our wrongdoing and sin. But not to crush us, but to save us. When we recognize the end of our strength, and turn to him in honesty—"I am Jacob"—and cry out for his blessing, he will then embrace us.

And don't you see, that here, exhausted and lying in the dust, Jacob is closer to God than he has ever been.

Christian

And for the long-time follower of the Lord. You who feel, in the trials of life, that God is battling against you—see here that when it seems God is fighting against us, he is actually fighting for us. There is a rest for you, when you come to the end of your strength: the end of your understanding, the end of your anger, and you stop struggling against God and instead collapse into his arms. And you say with the Psalmist:

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.² But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me" (Ps 131:1-2).

[T] There's one final part of the scene to consider: what happens in the end? Who is the man who walks away? Which brings us to our third observation: The New Life.

III. The New Life.

Some liken what happens to Jacob in these scene to a baptism, or conversion. It certainly has elements of this, as Jacob is forever different. And this, in two sense: he has a new name, and a new wound.

Name:

Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." (32:28).

In Genesis, a new name—especially given by God—speaks to character and calling. **Israel means to strive with God, or that God strives**—it seems to capture both, as this battle suggests. And this name, and the story of how it came about, will remain crucial for God's people when thinking about who they are. In the New Testament, Paul at one point speaks of the Church as the "Israel of God." The church is grafted into the tree that begins to grow here in Genesis (see Romans 9-11).

What does this name say about the character of calling of the people of God? It says that we are the people who are born of God. This is the first name of the patriarchs with the name for God, "El," in its. And it says that to be the people of God, in the fallen world, only happens through a

clash, a battle, where God breaks through our obstinance, crushes our sin under his feet, and we become aware of our weakness in the process. Israel are the people who, east of Eden, have been engaged by the divine, by God, and live to tell the story.

Limp: And Jacob is given a limp. In what are perhaps my favorite verses in the story of Jacob, we read in 30-31:

Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip (32:31-32).

Jacob is walking away with a new power, which issues from this encounter with God. But he cannot carry it without a limp. We hold this power in jars of clay. God's people are strong, only when they are humble; wise, only when they are willing to look foolish; powerful, when they are capable of being gentle. Jacob is a prince, but in meekness.

And this will always be a unique mark of the people of God: strength in weakness. Those who have been broken in their sin, who walk a new dependence upon God, have a type of limp. They will never trust their human strength entirely again.²

One writer captures well the essence of what has just happened as the silhouette of Jacob, limping now, fades away beneath the rising sun:

"These are the marks of Israel. The *new name* cannot be separated from the *new crippling*, for the crippling is the substance of the name."³

Close: American author Frederick Buechner [beak-ner] calls Jacob's wrestling with God a "Magnificent Defeat." Here are some of his words:

"Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, are his who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy, are only from God. And God is the enemy whom Jacob fought there by the river, of course, and whom in one way or another we all of us fight—God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy, because before giving us everything, he demands of us everything; before giving us life, he demands our lives—ourselves, our wills, our treasure."⁴

"Will we give them, you and I?" Buechner asks. "I do not know," he answers.

² "That is how Israel comes on the horizon. 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. Jacob is not consulted about his new identity. It is given, even imposed." (Brueggemann, Genesis 269).

³ Brueggemann, Genesis, 270

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, 18.

The truth is, we probably won't, not at least, without a fight, and a merciful defeat. Not until God mercifully breaks our strength so he can finally bind our wounds.

Buechner closes:

"Only remember the last glimpse that we have of Jacob, limping home against the great conflagration of the dawn. Remember Jesus of Nazareth, staggering on broken feet out of the tomb toward the Resurrection, bearing on his body the proud insignia of the defeat which is victory, the magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God."⁵

Let's pray.

Small Group Questions

1. Read vv 22-24. Jacob is all alone when God comes to wrestle with him. Why do you think this detail is important? Have you ever gotten alone to wrestle with God? What might that look like?
2. In verse 25 it appears the Jacob is stronger, "when the man saw that he did not prevailed against Jacob." Can you think of times when God has allowed humankind to think they are beating him? Consider the Enlightenment and subsequent "death of God" that Nietzsche announced. Consider our strivings in a post-modern society to be beyond moral absolutes, yet so desperate for justice. Where in your life do you feel you have "beaten" God (outsmarted, out-reasoned)? Do you wonder if God is actually bringing you to the end of your strength here?
3. Jacob is asked to state his name, "Jacob," (v27), which means "supplanter" (Gen 25:26; 27:36). To state his name is to be honest about his character. What would you have to say if God asked you, "Who are you, really?"
4. At the end the "man" wrestling with Jacob turns out to be the Lord (v.30). And in the end, the Lord blesses Jacob (v.29). Have you ever wrestled with God only to realize that the bout was about blessing you? Why did this blessing only come after a wrestling?
5. Jacob leaves this encounter limping. What do you think this says about what it means to encounter God and live before him?

⁵ Frederick Buechner *The Magnificent Defeat*, 18.