

Wrestling with God

2 Genesis 32:3-31

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Genesis 32:3-31

Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.'" The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking, "If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape."

And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'"

So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. These he delivered into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me, and put a space between drove and drove." He instructed the foremost, "When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you, 'To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?' then you shall say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover he is behind us.'" He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, "You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him, and you shall say, 'Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he thought, "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me." So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp. 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. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 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. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 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." 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. So

Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

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Jacob is a flawed man whose past has caught up with him. Twenty years ago he had tricked his elderly and nearly blind father Isaac into giving him the birthright of the first born which naturally belonged to his minutes-older brother Esau, and he has been on the run ever since. The stolen birthright meant a double portion of the inheritance, authority over the family, and a special covenant relationship with God. Once the words of Isaac had been spoken aloud, they could not be altered. An oral contract was as binding as a written one. Jacob had it all, Esau was left with crumbs as his inheritance.

After all of these years of running and estrangement from Esau, Jacob is about to see him again, and he is of course anxious, worried, fearful and burdened with guilt. The brash decision and deception of his youth has haunted his life and separated him from his family. Now there is a chance for it to be over, and it will be on his brother’s terms as Esau and his army of 400 men await him. Will Jacob be killed, be violently punished, will he lose everything he has?

Preparing the best he can he offers an olive branch out to Esau with a lavish and extravagant gift of slaves and cattle, and gentle words of hopeful reconciliation to at least ease their reunion. Jacob also prays for deliverance as God had called him to return to his country and to his kindred, and also promised to do him good. Jacob then carefully brings his two wives, his two maids, his eleven children, and all of his possessions across the Jabbok stream.

Now, utterly alone with no distractions or responsibilities, he prepares for the consequences of his long-ago actions. Perhaps his mind drifted back to the night after he had stolen Esau’s privilege and birthright and he had dreamt of an amazing ladder connecting heaven and earth¹ as the angels of God ascended and descended on it. Even in the midst of his deceitful action, God had made a promise to him, a promise affirming the intent of the birthright, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

This night too shall be a dramatic encounter with a man he perceives to be God. All night long they wrestle, they contend, they struggle, they roll round on the ground holding tightly to one another as each tries to defeat the other. In the endless scuffle Jacob’s hip is injured, yet he perseveres. Neither one giving up, neither one giving in, until the new day begins to dawn. As the first light breaks in, the man asks to be let go. In pain and exhaustion yet still recognizing the power of his adversary and contender, Jacob has a demand of him. “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” The man who will not reveal his own name replies to Jacob, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” As the sun rose on a renewed hope for the future, Jacob has a new name, Israel, and his body has been scarred as he limps away with a new focus for whatever lies ahead.

The experience of Jacob’s time of wrestling for a blessing with God, with life, with the unknown, with guilt, with the demons of the past, with the uncertainty of the future, with the anxieties of this day, this moment, is 4000 years old and yet for us it is as new as this exact moment.

There are so many mysteries and unanswered questions in this ageless, timeless story, and yet it resonates with everyone's life experiences as we wrestle with God, with life, with the unknown, with guilt, with the demons of the past, with the uncertainty of the future, with the anxieties of our days, with the bad news of each mornings' headlines, with the grim realities of the social injustices of the world, with the grief of losing loved ones, with relationships that have broken our hearts, with trying to understand the loss of something worked hard and long for, with the random devastation of a natural disaster, with the agonizing news of a diagnosis, with the life call to a direction we do not feel worthy or competent to follow. Jacob wrestled once, we wrestle over and over again and again in our lives.

The Scripture is mysterious, vague. "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." The 'man' is never identified for sure, although it's commonly assumed to be God—but that remains unknown. We also see that Jacob did not give up the fight, the 'man' did. Jacob was persistent, tenacious and at dawn he won the match by refusing to let go.

Our lives, our struggles, are often just like that. Things happen that cannot be rationalized or easily understood. We can be flawed yet receive gracious promises from God. Although we can share our burdens and fears with others, ultimately each of us must wrestle alone with the mysteries of God and of life. We will wrestle when we are in pain, when we are having doubts, when everything is on the line, when we are exhausted, when we struggle to hang on and make sense of it all. We too will survive often by nothing more elegant, more talented, more creative, than plain old just not giving up, just holding on. We seek a blessing when we are in a time of upheaval and uncertainty. And just like Jacob, we will leave with a limp, with a scar, carrying the marks of our struggle, and we will leave with a blessing only once we have persevered, when we continue to struggle and wrestle as a life of faith is a wrestling with God, and with life. Faith not just gift from God but is a lifelong pursuit of God for us, and us for God. Amen.

¹ Genesis 28: 10-22