



04 Jacob – Wrestling With God

*32 Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. <sup>2</sup> Jacob said when he saw them, "This is God's camp." So, he named that place Mahanaim. <sup>3</sup> Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. <sup>4</sup> He also commanded them saying, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; <sup>5</sup> I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I*

*may find favor in your sight.'*

*<sup>6</sup> The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and furthermore he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." <sup>7</sup> Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies; <sup>8</sup> for he said, "If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape."*

*<sup>9</sup> 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 relatives, and I will prosper you,' <sup>10</sup> I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. <sup>11</sup> Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. <sup>12</sup> For You said, 'I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.'"*

*<sup>13</sup> So he spent the night there. Then he selected from what he had with him a present for his brother Esau: <sup>14</sup> two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, <sup>15</sup> thirty milking camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. <sup>16</sup> He delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on before me, and put a space between droves." <sup>17</sup> He commanded the one in front, saying, "When my brother Esau meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and to whom do these animals in front of you belong?' <sup>18</sup> then you shall say, 'These belong to your servant Jacob; it is a present sent to my lord Esau. And behold, he also is behind us.'" <sup>19</sup> Then he commanded also the second and the third, and all those who followed the droves, saying, "After this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; <sup>20</sup> and you shall say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob also is behind us.'" For he said, "I will appease him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his*

face; perhaps he will accept me.”<sup>21</sup> So the present passed on before him, while he himself spent that night in the camp.

<sup>22</sup> Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.<sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had.

### **Jacob Wrestles**

<sup>24</sup> Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.<sup>25</sup> When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him.<sup>26</sup> Then he said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” But he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”<sup>27</sup> So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”<sup>28</sup> He said, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.”<sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him and said, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And he blessed him there.<sup>30</sup> So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.”<sup>31</sup> Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Peniel, and he was limping on his thigh.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s thigh in the sinew of the hip. (Genesis 32, NASB, 1995).

What does it mean “To Wrestle with God”?

This strange story starts with Jacob running from his brother Esau. In the passage we see him in a panic as his world is falling apart. His father-in-law is pursuing him from one side and his brother is coming after him from another. They are both angry at him, and we can feel the tension in the story. Jacob is about to break. What we see happening is Jacob coming to the end of himself, and it is then and only then that Jacob can see God. Let’s start off and try to figure out why Jacob was running so hard from his brother Esau. The precipitating event is found in Genesis Chapter 27. This is the culmination of a story in which Isaac, who was now an old man, was wanting to give his eldest son, Esau, a blessing. He asked him to go into the field and hunt deer and prepare a venison dinner, after which Isaac wanted to pronounce the birth right blessing upon his son Esau. The younger son Jacob tricked his old blind father into believing that he himself was Esau, and he cooked up a plot with his mother Rebecca to kill a goat and cook it like a deer to fool Isaac so he would bless Jacob instead. This was the last in a series of deceptions that Jacob perpetrated on his older brother throughout his life. In haste, Jacob fled the wrath of his brother. The text we just read is an account of Esau pursuing Jacob.

To best answer this question of what it means to “wrestle with God,” it helps to know about the family frictions that characterized Jacob’s life. Jacob was a determined man; he was a deceiver and a con artist. He lied. He manipulated the family, and he did whatever it took to better his own position. A person could justify it all and just say “Jacob made good trades,” but the fact of the matter is that he had a habit of getting the best of people to his own advantage. He was

always working on ways to get ahead at the expense of others. The name Jacob doesn't just mean a "deceiver." It also means he was a grabber, greedily grabbing things even if they didn't belong to him. I like to think of him more as a "schemer" than anything else.

Jacob's life is pretty much characterized by one struggle after another. He had heard of and received the promises of God, but he was full of insecurity, fear, and anxiety. He didn't really rely on the promises of God. As mentioned, he was constantly trying to figure out how to better his own situation at the expense of others. The Bible gives a thorough account of his dealings with his own father-in-law, Laban. Laban wasn't exactly a saint himself. Laban had two daughters and he tricked Jacob into marrying the oldest daughter Leah (we have reason to believe she was the not-so-good-looking sister). Jacob's desire was to marry the younger sister, Rachel, who was the love of his eye. He had to work many years to get Rachel. Jacob was put in charge of Laban's flocks and they prospered. Laban got used to the prosperity and got angry when Jacob wanted to leave his "employ" so to speak. The two devised a scheme having to do with who would get which offspring from the livestock. Jacob was to get the speckled and black animals and Laban was to get the others. The Bible account tells us that Jacob schemed to get the strongest and best animals for himself, and Laban got the rest. So in this passage we see a guy who had always gotten it his way, but now he was worn out and broken, coming to the end of himself.

Sick of his father-in-law's treatment, Jacob had fled Laban, only to have a run in with his embittered brother, Esau who had never gotten over the way Jacob had ripped him off. In the text we see Jacob putting together a bribe to buy off Esau's anger. Here he speaks to his servant.

*"Thus, you shall say to my lord Esau: 'Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; <sup>5</sup> I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.'* (Genesis 32:4b-5, NASB 1995).

Jacob sent a whole caravan of gifts along with his women and children across the River Jabbok in hopes of pacifying his brother. We then find Jacob exhausted, burned out, fearful, filled with anxiety and alone in the desert. Everything was on the line. All of his earthly possessions had been sent on ahead of him with no assurance that he'd ever see his wives or his "stuff" again. Jacob no longer had control of what was happening to him. He collapsed and fell into a deep sleep on the edge of the Jabbok river. His angry father-in-law, Laban, was behind him and Esau was in front of him coming after him. Jacob was in a tight spot.

*<sup>22</sup> Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had. (Genesis 32:22-23, NASB 1995).*

Then the final battle happened. That night as he slept, the text tells us that some sort of angelic stranger visited Jacob. *<sup>24</sup> Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until*

*daybreak. (Genesis 32:24, NASB 1995).* That is all the text tells us. Here is Jacob alone without anything else wrestling with whomever this is that God had sent. When the “man” started losing, he touched Jacob’s hip and did something to him to make him lame for the rest of his life. When Jacob was in the middle of the fight, he didn’t know what was going on, but in the light of dawn, he realized that he had been wrestling with God. As dawn broke, Jacob told the stranger to “bless him.” The interchange happens and then Jacob is given a new name.

*“Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.”<sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him and said, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And he blessed him there.<sup>30</sup> So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” (Genesis 32:28b-30, NASB 1995).*

We get into all sorts of pickles, as I am fond of saying. The world shouts one thing to us and God shouts another. Last week I told you that the promises of God result in testimonies, but the promises of the world end in tragedies and disappointments. We can learn a lot from Jacob. We can learn how dissatisfaction can undo us. Jacob wasn’t content to be in second place. He strove for first place even at his birth. We read the account of Rebecca giving birth to her twins.

*<sup>24</sup> When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb.<sup>25</sup> The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau.<sup>26</sup> Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. (Genesis 25:24-26, ESV).*

Jacob spent his life scheming, accumulating, orchestrating, and manipulating. Like Jacob, most of us jump into scheming, accumulating, orchestrating, and manipulating after birth. We somehow think we’ll be more secure if we can just get a hold on things (and people). When we do this, we’ll end up on the banks of the Jabbok River broken, spent, and worn out – just like Jacob. There is an insidious gospel being preached out there that says a blessed life has no hardship, hurt, disease, or disappointment. Unfortunately, that message doesn’t line up with the word of God. It is when we come to the end of ourselves that we come “face to face” with God. It is when we stop striving and fighting that we are blessed and our “life is preserved”.

Remember that the Apostle Paul experienced tremendous hardship, discouragement, and fear.

*<sup>5</sup> For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within.<sup>6</sup> But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus,<sup>7</sup> and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. (2 Corinthians 7:5-7, ESV).*

We are not promised to be spared from testing and trials, but we are promised that His grace will be there to take us through the testing and trials.

Jacob did what we must all do. When we come to the end of ourselves, we have to confront our insecurities, our failures, our weakness, our brokenness, and our sin. In confronting ourselves we can turn face to face with God. It reminds me of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus Himself said, *“Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8, ESV)*. Jacob finally arrived to a place where he was pure in heart. That is when he was able to “see God.” And, the text is very clear that he had to go through the whole night of struggle to get to the point where he received God’s blessing (Gen 32:29).

Dear friends, among many lessons what we must see here is that our lives are never meant to be easy. I wish I could say that they are. But that would be a lie. Our lives are difficult when we wrestle with God and His will for our lives. We often want so much for it to be different, but it often isn’t what we wish that it were. We are always in God’s presence, but when we go through the testing, the trials, and the fire, and THE WRESTLING, we can often sense and know that we are in His very presence. We wrestle with God out our relationship with others, our marriages, our kids, our finances, our emotions, our past, our present, and our future. When we wrestle, either we can submit to God or He can let us have our way. When we have our way, it never ends well. When God wins the wrestling match, there is a peace and a joy that come over us that cannot be understood.

Jacob wrestled there at the creekside, but blessing came to him. We too might wrestle with God’s will for our lives, but we must remember that God is good. When Jacob was through wrestling, scripture tells us: <sup>30</sup>*So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” (Genesis 32:30, NASB 1995)*.

We too can wrestle with God. When we finally relent and submit ourselves to His will, we too can experience Peniel, and we can say, “I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved.”

Let us pray.

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