

Real Intimacy and Wrestling in Prayer

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristchurchEastBay.org. Good morning, Christchurch. My name is Carrie Moulton, and I'm a member of the Welcome Team.

And today's reading is from the Old Testament, Genesis chapter 32, verses 7 through 12, and 22 to 32. In great fear and distress, Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well.

He thought, if Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape. Then Jacob prayed, O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord, you who have said to me, Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper.

I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps.

[1 : 28] Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, I will surely make you prosper, and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.

That night, Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the ford of 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.

And 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, 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.

[2 : 44] Jacob said, Please tell me your name. But he replied, Why do you ask my name? Then he blessed him there. 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 over 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 tenderloin.

Near the tendon, sorry. The grass withers, and the flowers fade. But the word of our God stands for ever. We are going to have a Q&A; after this service, as we're closing out this sermon series on Genesis.

So anything from today's text, anything from this book of Genesis, the Bible as a whole, anything about Christianity, anything about life with God, if you have questions, we'd love to not just have a monologue here, but to have a dialogue.

So please come and join me after the service for some Q&A.; For me personally, the book of Genesis has held me fast in what's been kind of a challenging season, but it's helped me to connect with the power of our creator God.

[4 : 10] It's helped me connect with, in a fresh way, with the grace of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All these amazing promises and blessings that the Lord has for his people from beginning with that mother promise in Genesis 3.15 that through the offspring of the woman, God will win a victory over evil.

All the way to this promise in Genesis 32.10 that God in his kindness, God in his faithfulness, will make his people prosper. He'll multiply them like the sand of the sea.

And if you identify as a Christian, you're a child of Abraham. If you have been baptized, you're a son of Jacob. You're a daughter of Jacob.

And all these promises, all these blessings are yours. We're going to close this series today with Jacob, who's probably one of the characters in Genesis we can identify with the most because he's a real sinner.

As we say in the South, he's a deep-fried sinner. And his spiritual life is bracketed by these two nighttime encounters with God.

[5 : 24] We remember a few weeks ago his first encounter in Genesis 28 in that place called Beth-El, the house of God. And now in his second encounter in Genesis 32 in this place called Penny-El, the face of God.

And this is really the great turning point of his life. He has this life-changing encounter with the living God and he basically becomes a new person, right?

He never walked the same way again having encountered the living God. So I want to conclude our series with a four-point sermon. It began this morning as a five-point sermon, so you're welcome.

And I should have you all out of here in a couple of hours. It should be fine. But I want to talk about getting alone with God, wrestling with God, living with a new name, and seeing the face of God.

So getting alone with God, wrestling with God, living with a new name, and seeing the face of God. So let's talk about getting alone with God. Verse 7 says that Jacob's afraid and in verse 24 it says Jacob's alone.

[6 : 35] So why is he afraid and why is he alone? Well, if you remember his story, he wrestled in his mother's womb with his twin brother, his brother Esau.

And the story, as it's told, is that Jacob came out of the womb and he was grabbing the heel of his brother Esau. And everybody saw that and they thought, oh, that's so cute.

He's grappling with his brother. He's wrestling his brother. And so they named him Jacob, which means heel grabber. But nobody really thought about how that was going to unfold, right?

Because for the next 20 years he'd be wrestling with his brother Esau. He convinced Esau to sell his birthright for a pot of stew. He lied and he acted like Esau in order to steal the blessing of the firstborn.

And that's what Jacob is. He's a heel grabber. He's a man wrestler. And he's run away from home as a fugitive and as an exile because he's made his brother so angry that his brother wants to murder him.

[7 : 45] And so Jacob leaves the promised land and for the next 20 years he finds another man to wrestle with. His name's Laban. He's a conniving and covetous man.

And Jacob finds a way to come out on top again. He marries not just one of Laban's daughters but two of them. He piles up great wealth at Laban's expense.

And this is just who Jacob is. He knows how to wrestle with people and he knows how to win every time. But now he's afraid and he's alone because he has to face up to his past.

His brother Esau is on the way with a fighting force of about 400 men and Jacob's guilty conscience is beginning to imagine the worst.

And what is he afraid of? Well he's thinking to himself you know if I wrestle my brother who's coming to meet me tomorrow this time I'm going to lose.

[8 : 48] This time I'm going to die. And so what does he do? Well he sends gifts to pacify Esau and he divides up his group in order to minimize the collateral damage.

But he's still alone and he's still afraid. And in his desperation he prays the longest prayer in the book of Genesis. And here's what he says in verse 9.

Then Jacob prayed, O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, Lord you who said to me go back to your country and your relatives and I will make you prosper.

God had commanded Jacob in Genesis 31.3 to go back to the promised land and Jacob hears the word of the Lord and he submits to it. He obeys it.

And now he's learning how to be alone with God. Learning how to pray to God. He's changing, right?

[9 : 49] He's listening to God and he's talking to God. And his prayer sounds like one of the penitential psalms, one of those psalms of confession. And just listen to the elements of this prayer.

He says in verse 10, I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you've shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan but now I've come in two camps.

Save me I pray from the hand of my brother Esau for I'm afraid he will come and attack me and also the mothers with their children. But you have said I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea which cannot be counted.

It's a model prayer really. He says, O Lord, God of my fathers, I'm unworthy. I'm undeserving before your goodness.

And he begins to affirm the attributes of God's character. He says, God, you are kind. God, you are faithful. And your loyal love can be counted on.

[10 : 48] And you are worthy. As a result of that, you're worthy that I should be your humble servant. And so he says, God, as your humble servant, I'm ready to serve others. I'm ready to serve my enemies.

I'm ready to serve my brother who wants to kill me. And then he petitions God and he says, Lord, save me. Lord, give me salvation.

And he argues his case for why God should save him. He says, Lord, you made promises to me. You made promises to Isaac. You made promises to Abraham. You said that you would make me prosper.

You said that you would make my people like the sand of the sea. And so what I'm praying is I'm praying that you would keep your promises. And so this is such a good sign.

This prayer of Jacob is such a good sign because it shows us that he's learning how to be alone with God. Right? And this isn't just a one-off prayer because he gets alone with God again in verse 23.

[11 : 52] It says that after he'd sent his people across the stream and he sent his possessions across the stream, it says Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. See, we need a community of believers around us to help us grow in our relationship with God, to help us grow in faith, to grow in wisdom.

But Jacob would not have had this life-transforming personal encounter with God if he had not gotten alone with God. If he had not experienced solitude with God, if he hadn't had some distance from himself and his people, from himself and his possessions, he would have never been in this position to wrestle with God, which we're going to talk about in a moment.

So how does this apply to our lives? Well, the question today is do you get alone with God? It's so easy to be carried along by a community of faith and to experience the people around us as they're experiencing God, but to not actually be getting alone with God yourself and coming in direct personal contact with God yourself.

Right? It's so easy for us to know information about God but to not really know God himself. So if your faith is just cultural, if your faith is just sociological, if it's just cerebral, if it's just a set of intellectual propositions but you're not actually alone with God like Jacob was alone with God, you're not actually praying to God like Jacob was praying to God, then is your faith real?

Is your faith personal? Is your faith experiential? Are you living externally in an atmosphere of faith but that atmosphere hasn't actually penetrated you internally?

[13 : 41] It hasn't entered into the inner life of your soul? And here's what I've learned is that if we don't volunteer to get alone with God, often God will find a way to get us alone with him.

Right? God gets Jacob alone through an enemy who's breathing down his neck. I don't even think Jacob would be alone were it not for this situation that's utterly beyond him, that's causing him to feel absolutely desperate.

God can use an enemy like Esau. He can use tragedy, sickness, broken relationships, conflict at home, conflict at work, a rebellious child, financial trouble.

Whatever he, whatever means seems good to God, he can use it to get us alone with him. And like it or not, the reality is that a day is coming in life when all of us must be alone with God.

when you're wheeled into that surgery all alone, when you're on your deathbed in the middle of the night all alone, all of us are eventually going to be alone with God.

[14 : 53] And so I think this text suggests that it's better to go ahead and just volunteer to get alone with God and learn how to pray to God now before you're in absolute crisis.

So that's point one, getting alone with God. Point two, wrestling with God. Jacob spent his whole life wrestling with people. He wrestled with his family, his brother, his dad.

He wrestled with his boss, Laban. He wrestled with the women in his life. But what he needs is to be spiritually transformed. He needs to learn how to wrestle with God.

And so God initiates a wrestling match. And it says in verse 24 that Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. And this is totally unexpected.

It's absolutely full of mystery. Jacob isn't even sure who it is that's jumped him. He just knows that he's being attacked by some nameless assailant.

[16 : 02] and really that's what it means to be a Christian. To be a Christian is to be aware that someone has intruded on you. Somebody has interfered in your life.

Somebody's jumped you. Somebody has made you uncomfortable. Somebody has apprehended you and they're bothering you and they're holding on to you. They're not letting go of you. That's what it means to be a Christian.

It means to wrestle with somebody. Anybody wrestle? Anybody ever wrestle with your siblings growing up?

All three of my kids should be raising their hands right now. Anybody actually wrestle in high school or anything like that? Like serious? Okay. If you wrestled for just like five minutes I can't remember how long the rounds go but just five minutes of trying to overpower your opponent.

Just five minutes of trying to pin down their shoulders in submission is an absolutely sweaty and exhausting struggle. And this says that Jacob is so strong he's so resistant that he will not be overpowered.

[17:15] He will not be pinned down. Right? He holds God off all night long. And if you go to a strength trainer if you go to you know a physical therapist they'll tell you that your hip rotation is the source of your power generation.

Right? If you want that kind of kinetic explosive power in any kind of sport especially wrestling you've got to strengthen your hips. Right? You've got to drive with your hips.

And this is really the moment of Jacob's transformation because it says in verse 25 that when the man saw that he could not overpower Jacob he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with God as he wrestled with the man.

This is the first hint that Jacob gets that in the dark he's being grappled with by a formidable foe. And it doesn't say that his assailant yanked his hip or smashed his hip or you know hit his hip it just says that with a mere touch just with a mere tap Jacob's hip was wrenched it was disjointed it was dislocated Jacob was rendered powerless.

Now why would Jacob's wrestling partner do that? Why would he show his immense power by just touching his hip so that his leg was utterly painful and utterly useless and utterly powerless so that all Jacob could do would just be to hold on for dear life right would just be to cling to him and to not let him go.

[19:11] Why would he do that? Because Jacob his whole life long has been relying on himself. His whole life long he's been relying on his own strength right with his brother with his father with his boss with the women in his life he's saying I will not I'll never surrender I'll never be overpowered and even in this moment he's saying I'm not I'm not going to surrender to you but it's only when he's wrenched right it's only when he's wounded it's only when he's weak and powerless that Jacob stops wrestling against God to hold him off and that Jacob starts wrestling with God to hold him close right and here's what it says in verse 26 then the man said let me go for it is day break but Jacob replied I will not let you go unless you bless me see before

Jacob said I'll never let you overpower me nobody is going to overpower me but now Jacob says I will not let you go unless you bless me before Jacob says I was trying to make you let go of me but now I'm not going to let go of you and he realizes that the one who has the power to dislocate his hip with the slightest touch must also be the one who has the power to bless me you must be the person that that can give me the blessing that I've always wanted and that I've sought by wrestling with people and this is the moment of spiritual transformation in his pain in his weakness in his vulnerability and his powerlessness when Jacob realizes that he can really only get the blessing he wants by wrestling with God now how does this apply to our lives well many many modern people think that having a spiritual experience with God will feel like a good thing will feel you know getting close to God will cause me to feel calm and centered and it'll be healing and peaceful and I'll just be overcome by a sense of love and comfort and I'll be so uplifted and there'll be no unexpected difficulties but we already know from Genesis 28 when Jacob encountered the Lord of the stairway it says that he was afraid and he felt extremely uncomfortable in the presence of God and the result of that was that Jacob gave away 10% of his wealth which was incredibly painful and then here in

Genesis 22 Jacob encounters this unknown wrestler and it says he was wounded and he was rendered powerless and so the question is do you really want to have a spiritual encounter with the living God the reality is that most of us if we want to transform life we're not going to be comforted into a transformed life we're going to be wrestled into it and what if like Jacob God loves you too much to leave you the way you are what if instead of healing you or what if instead of preserving your health God actually wants to change you which means that he's got to deal with the things that are destroying you the self sufficiency the self centeredness operating out of your own strength and your own strategies and your own resources if he's going to get rid of those things in your life it's going to involve a painful wrenching what if

God is actually at war against the stuff within us that's at odds with him you see in his severe mercy he wrenches Jacob's hip and he gets him into a position where instead of trying to wriggle his way out of God's grip which is what Jacob's always been doing that instead he says God you're in my grip now and I'm not letting you go because only you have the blessing I really need the blessing I wanted from my family the blessing I wanted from my work the blessing I wanted from the significant others in my life I realize now that only you can give me the blessing that I really need and that I really want and so he says oh love that will not let me go I'm not going to let you go and he's wrestling with God point number three getting alone with God wrestling with God point number three living with a new name living with a new name what fascinates me is that

Jacob Jacob says bless me and then the next thing he hears is well what's your name and that tells us that part of the blessing is getting rid of our old name and our old identity and receiving from God a new name and a new identity and this is what it says in verse 26 it says I will not let you go unless you bless me and then the man asked him well what is your name and he answered Jacob now what is God doing here does God not know his name you know when God asks questions in the Bible it's not for his benefit it's for ours right Genesis 3 Adam where are you he knows where Adam is Adam do you know where you are in relation to me Jacob what's your name do you know who you are before me and Jacob says well my name is

[25 : 39] Yaakov my name is heel grabber and he knows he's being invited to confess his sins because 20 years ago I lied about my name in order to get ahead and get what I wanted 20 years ago I said my name is Esau and I pretended to be somebody I was not in order to get the blessing that I most deeply wanted and so now I'm I'm renouncing my wrongs my name is Yaakov and I'm not just renouncing what I've done I'm renouncing who I am my name is Yaakov I don't say it with pride I say it with my head down because I have a grimy past and I have an unsavory character I've been grabbing and pulling and pulling and lying and cheating and manipulating and overreaching and deceiving and living my life to win at all costs I've been self-centered I've been self-interested I've been self-sufficient my name is

Jacob I'm an unworthy sinner I'm a slave to myself I'm a slave to sin I'm a spiritual disaster I'm a moral failure what this tells us is that if we want to experience God there's absolutely no way around just confessing who we are and the moment he does that God gives him a new name Jacob's been holding on to God in pain saying bless me and God's actually holding on to Jacob and he says to Jacob in verse 28 he says your name will no longer be Jacob but Israel because you have struggled with God and with human beings and have overcome see what does Jacob really need what do we really need we need to know who we are in relation to God we need to know our true identity and what is that well this name Israel it's a name

L means God it's a name that means God fights God wins God rules and when applied to Jacob the name means from now on you are one who fights with God and wins with God and rules with God that is your true nature that is your deep essence that is to be your authentic identity and the way that you define yourself from here on out and as Israel you will no longer struggle you'll no longer prevail in your own strength you'll struggle and prevail in God's strength you are to be one who persistently struggles with God in humble prayer and with a limp permanently crumpled physically but empowered spiritually until you overcome you're to be one who clings dependently to God until God gets the victory in your life you guys tracking with me how does this apply to our lives well

I think all of us want to get the blessing I think all of us want someone who matters to lay their hands on us and to take us in their arms to take us in their grip and to say you're worthy you're special you have a name of significance you have an identity with a hopeful future and you know there's so much pain in the world because everybody wants the blessing but they don't actually know how to get it and in our secular age masses of people are experiencing identity crises that are profound and pervasive everybody's feeling a burden to name themselves to define their identity to construct an inner self about who I am apart from any kind of transcendent reality any sort of transcendent order or power the modern project is to find my highest truth in my deepest desires and then to somehow express the real me the authentic me and that I think is a terribly oppressive and enslaving burden that people have placed upon themselves because

Genesis 32 says that identity formation actually works the exact opposite way identity formation is not about inside out it's about outside in it's about God coming to you and jumping you and taking hold of you and interrogating you and saying what's your name who are you really and if you say to God well my name is good and my identity is fine just the way I am if you say that you're not ready for God as long as you say I'm okay the way I am you're going to go on being okay but without God but Genesis 32 says by disclosing your name by opening up your heart about your character and your condition before God by owning up to the shadow side and confessing the guilt and the shame you put yourself in a position to experience the mercy and the grace of God because only a

[31 : 34] God of mercy can truly know us as we are all the way down to the bottom that we're Jacob and yet he still loves us and only a God of grace can do away with our old name and our shady past and give us a new name that points to a triumphant future God fights God wins God rules and Genesis 32 says that God in his sovereign kindness God in his sovereign faithfulness is a God who takes Jacob's with all of our failures with all of our sorry track records with all of our unworthiness that makes us and he makes us into Israel's he takes people manipulators and turns them into God wrestlers and he gives us a name that we can be proud of a name that we can aspire to live up to and really this is what it means to be a Christian that you no longer identify as someone who's centered on yourself and what you make of yourself you identify as a person who's centered on God and what

God makes of you and when you're baptized into the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit you now identify as someone who's personally related to the living and triune God and when you take upon yourself the name Christian which means little Christ you no longer identify as yourself you identify as Christ which means that your old self your Jacob identity is dead and your new self your Israel identity is alive you are in Christ you are united to the resurrected Lord and you are alive to the love of the Trinity who's clinging to you and will never let you go from his blessing and so friends do you know do you know who you are what's your name are you living from your God given name and your

God given identity point number four and I'm glad I cut point number five I'm seeing that at this point point number four is seeing the face of God right having gotten alone with God having wrestled with God having received a new name from God seeing the face of God and remember the context is that Jacob's forced to face reality he's got this long dreaded meeting with his brother that he cannot avoid coming the next day Esau is just around the corner he's a guy who's angry and he's been saying for 20 years when my mom and dad die I'm going to kill my brother and Jacob doesn't want to see his brother face to face because if he sees his brother face to face he's afraid he's going to die and so listen to these words in verse 29

Jacob said please tell me your name but he replied why do you ask my name and then he blessed him there so Jacob called the place Penny L saying it is because I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared!

See Jacob thought if I see my brother face to face tomorrow I'm going to die my life's not going to be spared and his greatest concern is right here but now Jacob realizes that actually he's facing a deeper reality than his brother right he thought his biggest concern is what's going to happen tomorrow on this horizontal level on this human plane but he realizes that actually his biggest concern is what's happening right now on the vertical level on the divine plane as I'm meeting with God face to face he thinks that his biggest problem is that he needs to deal with his estranged brother who he can see when actually he needs to deal with this strange mysterious other whom he cannot see and so what is Israel what is this man who struggles with God and wins with God do he says please tell me your name and this is quite bold because

[36 : 10] Jacob is saying I want to know who you are I want you to give me more of yourself I want to have a relationship with you please tell me your name and what he hears back is why do you ask my name Jacob you know the answer to the question who else who else could I possibly be and then the wrestling match is over and as the morning sun is rising Jacob says to himself maybe he says out loud he says I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared he can hardly believe that somehow God has voluntarily come down onto my level that for some reason

God has intentionally held back his full strength and he's curbed his incredible power so as not to crush me and yet with the mere touch of his divine power he conquered me in an instant and he stamped me with his name he stamped me with his identity and he gave me the blessing I've been looking for my whole life long and somehow I an unworthy sinner Jacob had a direct personal relational encounter with a holy and living God and yet I survived yet my life was spared and I was saved and he's overwhelmed he says God for some reason he feigned weakness in order to answer my prayer for salvation now can any of us think of another time when God came down on our level and when God held back his full strength and when God laid aside his power and God became weak in order to show us his face and where God didn't destroy us in judgment but he actually spared our life and he gave us salvation anybody think of a time when that happened 2nd Corinthians 4 says the light of the knowledge of

God's glory is displayed in the face of Jesus Christ and that means that in the face of Jesus we see the face of God most clearly and yet at the same time Jesus is an Israelite he comes into the world as the true Israelite who bears the name of God and whose whole life long was a desperate clinging to God and then at the end of the gospels when Jesus is alone in the dark like Jacob was alone in the dark and he's there in Gethsemane Jesus says father I will not let you go even if you break me and of course the next day on his cross Jesus entire body Jesus entire soul was absolutely wrenched in agony and while Jacob risked his life to say I will not let you go unless you bless me Jesus actually gave his life and said

I will not let you go until you bless them and on the cross we see this one who's struggling with God to win the blessing for us he's saying God let me take the curse so that they can get the blessing God do not spare my life because I want to spare their lives eternally God's war against our sin that's destroying us is finally finally won in that bloody mess of Jesus cross and the crucifixion of the Lord who made heaven and earth shows us what it actually means to be Israel right because God in that moment on the cross God fights God wins God rules not through naked power not through raw strength he he wins through weakness he wins through powerlessness he wins through sacrificial self-giving love and so friends

I ask you are you are you able to say like Jacob said I have seen God's face in his crucified son Jesus and because of that my life was spared my life has been saved you know if God can turn this night of fear for Jacob into a new morning of hope for Israel how much more hope do we have in the morning light that's risen upon us on Easter Sunday how much more hope do we have in that new life that's been given to us by our crucified yet resurrected Lord Jesus the story ends in a fascinating way it says in verse 31 the son 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

[41 : 58] Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon let's pray oh God make us a people who want to get alone with you make us a community of God wrestlers Lord make us people who cling to you even when it hurts people who hold on to you no matter what make us a people who will not let go of you until we get the blessing of God and the name of God and the face of God Lord make us a people who walk not in our own sufficiency relying on ourselves and relying on our strength but cause us to be a people who walk with a limp cause us to be a people who pray in humble dependence on the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob we pray in Jesus name amen