

The Wrestler (2)

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[0 : 00] And taking up with chapter 32 of Genesis and verse 22, we find that Jacob has now crossed the ford of Jabbok.

Words are important in the Bible. Names are important in the Bible. Jabbok means a place of wrestling.

And so if you think in terms of UFC Ultimate Fighting Championship, also sometimes thought of as MMA, Mixed Martial Arts, the wrestling ring is called the Octagon.

Some of the old wrestling matches were actually chain-linked fence and wire. You were shut up into a space with an opponent.

And that was the word. But there's a play on words here because Jabbok also means God who wrestles. And that is the place that we find Jacob this morning.

[1 : 24] It's an extraordinary meeting in the dark of night. And it will change Jacob's life forever.

I've been thinking a lot this summer. I'm a bit on a quest to answer this question. How does God change people?

It began by me asking the question, how does Phil change Phil? I saw some characteristics in my life that I won't bore you with.

So minor. And I said, I really want to change that. But it led me to see that, as my dad used to say growing up with a very rural philosophy, Son, you can't change people.

Nobody can change people. We can't even change ourselves. I know where my quest is going to lead me, though. And that is that, no, we can't change even ourselves.

[2 : 51] We can try. And we can have all kinds of techniques and strategies, even disciplines. But the Holy Spirit can change me.

God himself wants to change me. And that is the divine design.

Not simply that I be forgiven of my sins, but that I be spiritually transformed with a goal in mind. Small goal.

To be an image bearer of Jesus Christ. So that when people in this life, as long as breath remains, when they've encountered me, they've actually encountered some type of image of Jesus.

As he's forgiven me, then I'm quick to forgive others their offenses. As we even prayed in the Lord prayer. As he has been patient with me, then I image that by being patient with others.

[4 : 03] God changes people. But I'm still on the quest because now I'm asking, Okay, how does God change people? Through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The transforming work of the Holy Spirit. But give me the details. How does that work? And I'll tell you what I've discovered thus far.

And it's right here in this text. God does not change us by comfort.

I used to preach that. But I don't believe that anymore. I used to, I will say for a precisionist, generally God does not change us by comfort.

Because sure as the world, somebody at the door, during tea, is going to say, Well, God changed me by comfort. My whole life is in effect grateful and a flow of gratitude because of all the blessings, because of all the good things that He's done in my life.

[5 : 18] Okay, I'll be corrected. Feel free. But very rarely has God changed Phil Stogner by blessings and comforts first.

God has to wrestle us into spiritual transformation. God will use affliction.

In this case, He will even use injury as a memento and reminder. God has to overpower our will, our desires, our design, our strategies.

Now, I don't know how much you know about ultimate fighting. This week, this week, at the start, I didn't know a lot about ultimate fighting.

I think I'd even seen one round, not even, typically there's three to five rounds at most, but it's very intensive, and I don't think that, I've never seen a full match.

[6 : 37] But ultimate fighting wrestling is brutal. The wrestling that I've mentioned before is very entertaining, if not comic.

And there, the names of the, of those that are opponents, or those that are facing opponent, those that are contestants in wrestling that we're accustomed to, they get their name from their persona or their characteristics.

Andre, the giant. You look at him and you say, well, that, that's fitting. But in ultimate fighting, the moves of an opponent, particularly those moves that are geared for the submission of the other opponents, other opponent, the move gets the name from the man.

And in the, in the ring, the octagon, there's one who might enter and be seen as the submission master.

He is very gifted with certain moves, holds, even chokeholds, to get his opponent to submit.

[8 : 19] And if his opponent is able to maneuver out of that mold, out of that move, he's known as a submission magician.

It's all about getting your opponent to submit by moves. And many moves through the years, such as the chimeria move, which is a, it's an arm hold, an arm lock.

And it's where you would take, and it's like a, a four square, where imagine a person's arm goes over the top of my arm and their hand is right here, and you basically put pressure on that, and it's famous for breaking an opponent's arm.

But it's a hold that submission matches are won over and over and over again if a submission master can get his opponent in it.

I want you to see three things very quickly, very briefly, with three, three names.

[9 : 37] One who is placed in this wrestling ring, this octagon, is Jacob, and his move, his famous move, is the hill holder.

So Jacob, the hill holder, on one side, ready to go in this wrestling match. On the other side is God. And we're going to see, as even was read, God could be given the nickname from his move, which is hip crusher.

Disabling. a very serious injury. But then, finally, I want you to see that Jacob, he changes his move.

He becomes the God gripper. Now, along with the kids' talk, and that outline, you can tune out the rest of the message, unless you're somebody that really wants to know the details.

Because it's in this wrestling match that Jacob, in his wrestling with God and being afflicted, in his hip being crushed, that he's transformed into a man who will grip God tightly and closely for the rest of his life.

[11 : 16] If you want to know how that occurs, listen on. So, first of all, we see here Jacob, the heel holder. Now, Jacob has been, in one sense, a wrestler all of his life.

And he got the nickname, Jacob, the heel holder, in the womb. As the babies were being born, he was tussling and wrestling with his brother, his twin, Esau, in the womb.

And wanting to be first, wanting to be seen as first, and wanting the benefits of being first, he tries to pull, as it were, Esau back into the womb at birth.

And then later, we see him wrestling with his father for a blessing, for approval, to like me, to validate my life, Dad, going to the length of disguising himself, so that when he draws close to his father, seeking approval, Isaac says, come a little closer, come a little closer, son.

And he grabs him by the arms. Sorry, David. And he says, he's making his move.

[13 : 02] He's saying, the voice is Jacob, but the arms of Esau. So you win. That strategy, that move won. And then later, arms aching, aching for a beautiful woman, aching to have a beauty in his life, aching for Rachel.

He's out maneuvered by Laban, but then he takes some moves. He gets Rachel, but as a consequence, he doesn't love, has no love left for Leah.

Now relationships are beginning to be broken, a relationship broken with Esau, a relationship broken with Isaac. He'll never see his dad again alive. He runs away.

Now a relationship with Leah is broken. And then finally there's this relationship with Laban. Laban's possessions begin to go down and Jacob's wealth begins to come up.

Finally I'm somebody. Finally I've got sheep. I've got children. Look, I've got something. And Laban, a very, very worthy opponent, begins to make his maneuvers.

[14:17] But the point is Jacob now after 20 years is back. But he's making his entry into his inheritance, the land of Canaan, the promised land to him, a land that God had promised to Abraham and then to his father Isaac.

And now that promise is upon Jacob. But he enters not with a ticker tape parade, but he enters with the dark descending upon all of his strategy and his preparations to try to appease Esau.

And it's a place of wrestling. Now, I need to leave this point. But do you see yourself like Jacob? are you currently or have you, can you recall a place where you were in a situation that you felt pressure?

And you felt like there's a bit of a struggle going on with God. I have my desires, be it in significance or be it in security, be it in relationships, but God is not cooperating.

[15:55] You're beginning to find that you are employing your old strategies and your old moves. Jeremiah 17.9 is a very, very well-known scripture verse.

The heart is deceitful above all things. And the word for deceitful is the word Jacob.

Have you come to the place where you recognize your heart is Jacob? You're Jacob? I'm Jacob? I had a friend of mine who did an in-depth study on guarding your heart. And he said, you know, on the other side of this study, I've changed the way that I see the scriptures that talk about guarding your heart.

He said, I used to imagine my heart being ringed by guards, and they're all pointing their guns or their swords out to the world and say, stay away from this heart, stay away from this heart.

[17:07] But he said, now I see that they're all pointed in to the heart. And the guards are there saying, uh-uh-uh. Don't run away.

Don't be deceitful. Don't con others. Not your independence. You stay put.

Stay with God. God. God. On the other side of Jacob, the heel holder, is God, the hip crusher.

Now, I can't help but cite one of my favorite preachers and writers, Tim Keller, talking about this passage.

And it's a little bit lengthy quote, but bear with me. Because he asked a really good question, given the context that this wrestling match takes place.

[18:24] in all the teaching you've ever gotten, in all your expectations about how God operates, how do you expect God to respond to a man who has obeyed him at the risk of his life?

He has put his life on the line to obey God's word and follow his will. God had commanded him in chapter 31 to now was the time to go back home.

Who is seeking him in prayer? That's earlier in chapter 32. Who's filled with fear and he's at the end of his rope?

How does God respond to a man who is utterly obedient, seeking him in prayer, scared, and at the end of the rope? What does God do to a man like that?

He clobbers him. He knocks him down, literally. He assaults him. He puts a hammer lock on him and he maims him for the rest of his life.

[19:41] Keller will go on to talk about how this God is like no other religion's God.

No other faith group has a God that operates this way, that wrestles us even to the point of bringing a trial or suffering or affliction in order to break us and bend us to the point of injury and a lifelong memory of the bout in order for us to be straightened.

That he'll take Jacob the crooked, he'll bend him in order to be Israel the straight. that's our God.

Sinclair Ferguson said, God in order God in order to have Jacob's heart is prepared to dislocate Jacob's hip.

God wants to capture my heart and he's willing to make me weak, disable me, and injure me at Phil Stogner's strongest point, not my weakest point.

Paul suffered with a thorn in the flesh. He called it even a messenger from Satan. But he said, in God's hands, that was to keep me humble.

[21:35] And that's a good place for Paul to be. Have you experienced God in that way?

Something that you found your significance in and it was taken away, or threatened? Something that gave you security, it even gave you life. Your hearts, you put, it's your desire and your dreams and it's right there and then it's dashed.

What if that's God's hand at work? Because he wants more of you. and he's overcoming your moves, your strategies.

The question is asked about this text because Jacob does change. What is the point?

At what point did Jacob change? And scholars point to verse 25. When the man saw that he did not prevail, put win in parentheses against Jacob, he touched his hip socket and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

[23 : 09] And then in verses 26, we read that Jacob did not let go. So in an ultimate fight, the goal of each opponent is to get the other one to tap out.

Now, you can actually Google, there's a word called tapology. technology. It's a field of study, of knowledge.

What move can I put on my opponent to get them to cry uncle? I surrender. And to tap out, you can tap the deck, you can tap if words fail you, your opponent, and they immediately release you. and you've won because they've surrendered. Who taps out?

Look, if you've got your Bible in front of you, we don't see Jacob tapping out.

[24 : 36] He is now maimed for life. And I've never had a hip injury. But I'm told that it's very painful.

It's immobilizing. And indeed, the result and consequence for Jacob is a limp for the rest of his life. But he doesn't tap out. He perseveres. He doesn't. He's got God who he identifies at this point as the opponent.

It's in verse 25 that he identifies God. Now, we don't see that in black and white, but it's there. You know how we know that it's true that this is the point that he identified that he's God?

Well, first and foremost, we see that evidenced in verse 26 when he says, I'm not going to let you go unless you bless me. He knows this is not a man. But secondly, he knows that his opponent has just shown some weakness.

[25 : 56] All right, you got me in your move. You got me in this come here lock. You got me tied up here. Day is coming on.

If that sun rises, your life is going to be different then. You'll die.

But Jacob's saying, why didn't he touch, I mean, this is a fight for life. Why didn't he touch my jaw? If the same, and the word here is literally tap.

I think that's interesting. Tapologists would love that. God's an ultimate fighter, truly. But it's barely a touch. Barely a touch.

If he had put that same touch to his jaw, he would have died. He would have destroyed Jacob. What's my point? God tapped out.

[26 : 59] let me go. I surrender to your grip. God, it's the paradox of even the gospel.

It's the great paradox of God's economy of justice. God became weak and declares us the winner. And Jacob saw that. You could have killed me. You could have destroyed me, but you didn't. You could have just brushed me off with a hand, but you didn't. You said, you win. And he will change his name to winner, prevailer.

And how did Jacob win? Well, there's no more wrestling. He's exhausted now, I'm sure. He's just hanging on and he becomes, at that moment, he becomes Israel.

[28 : 18] He becomes one who hangs on to God. He becomes Jacob, the God gripper. In Galatians 16, I mean, in Galatians 6, verse 15 and 16, we read that Paul in writing to the Galatian church, he says, you know what?

It's not whether you're of the circumcision group or the non-circumcision group, it's whether you're a new creature, a new creation. And he said, may the peace of Christ, may Jesus rule over you people of Israel.

Christians in the New Testament, it's the first occasion that Christians in the New Testament are now aligned with Jacob as Israel.

Don't miss this. Our heart is Jacob, but God, through the gospel of Jesus Christ, now calls us his God grippers, his people, his chosen people.

God is calling me Israel. I'm Israel. I'm Israel, but I'm also Jacob. Brendan Manning says, whenever you ask him, he says, who am I?

[29 : 53] Well, Abba is my father, so that means I'm a son of God with an insatiable appetite for beer.

We're both, we're this mix. But from this point on, Jacob, he will grip, not physically, but he will grip for the rest of his life and have a limp to remind him, God.

As I end, commentators and scholars spill a lot of ink asking a question about verse 29.

Jacob asks a question, he says, what's your name? And scholars believe that it's as if the opponent, God, says, you know, you know already who I am.

You know that you've been wrestling with me. You've been wrestling with me all your life. And then he gives them what Jacob truly has found that he wants and he desires above every desire, not the blessing of Esau, not the blessing of his father, not the blessing of Rachel, not the blessing of Laban, but the blessing of God, the good will of God, peace with God, intimacy with God.

[31 : 34] And where scholars debate is what did he say to Jacob in the blessing? I like what Luther said.

Luther says that God at that point blessed Jacob with the story of a future day, of another wrestling match, of a future Jacob, a better Jacob, the Messiah, Jesus, who on a cross would fight with God. God, why? God, what are you doing? God, have you abandoned me? And he represents every one of us as Jacob on that cross. but he taps out.

But he taps out in death. And he declares us the winner by dying in our place. And that Luther speaks to Jacob and he says, you keep hanging on to God because it's God's plan that all the Jacobs become Israel and become God grippers.

Well, I want to encourage you to consider today how does God change you?

[33 : 20] What is he up to? Can you take a different perspective on trial or suffering or loss? to realize that in the hands of a good God it's to declare us winners, that he continues to transform us as sons and daughters.

others. I know for me that I'm currently, I've been thinking, I wanted to give a personal illustration of where I'm currently in the wrestling ring with God and I'm struggling, struggling to surrender myself to what I believe to be God's direction and will versus my own desire that I'm hanging on to.

you. And I couldn't identify anything and I'm not trying to be noble or good because I've had them and I will have them again.

Jacob will still enter the ring but I know on the other side I'll come out Israel. and my goal is that when I enter that ring again that I will see just how very weak I am.

I sin. I got my moves, I got my strategy for my name, for my ministry, for my relationships, for my finances and then I'll see God, Jesus even, I'll see his weakness, the weakness of the extent of his love for us to die in our place.

[35 : 09] And in that place, come out of the other side of that, a changed person. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do ask that you would meet us right now and that we would identify you in the struggle.

Maybe we've been thinking that it's other people that are standing in our way but it's actually you. Maybe we think that it's other circumstances and my techniques and my move, I need to up my game.

But it's you. O Lord, would you break my grip on anything other than you?

Will you strengthen our faith in you, our grip on you by seeing both our weakness but where you became weak that we might be strong?

And to this end we pray as your people, your Israel, in Jesus' name, Amen.