

# Grace In Genesis (viii)

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please turn with me to Genesis 32, and especially the words between verses 22 and 32, the account of how Jacob wrestles with God.

Grace in Genesis number 8. I still don't like Jacob. Maybe it's a personality thing, or maybe it's just that he's a twister.

And a fraud. He always seems to come out smelling of roses, but he just wouldn't be on my list of 10 people to send a Christmas card to or have dinner with.

Or maybe it's just that I'm just a bit jealous that he was the recipient, not just of the dream of a ladder reaching to heaven, but that he got to see God face to face.

And he wrestled with God. The truth is that Jacob, more than any of the other great patriarchs, didn't deserve what he got from God. You know, we tend to talk about people not deserving what they get from God.

[ 1 : 08 ] And what we mean is that something bad has happened to them, and they didn't deserve it. But when it comes to Jacob, so many good things happened to him, and he didn't deserve one of them.

That, you see, is what we call grace. Jacob's life from beginning to end is the story of the grace of God. A grace that we don't always like and sometimes we rather resent.

How God could show such favor to a grasper, that's what his name means, like Jacob, is quite beyond us.

But then I suppose if we knew ourselves like God knows us, how God could show favor to any of us would also be a mystery. Genesis 32, and especially this passage which covers Jacob's nighttime wrestling with God, is, together with Jacob's ladder, the most famous event in this man's life.

It can be understood from many levels. For example, it can be opened up from the perspective of prayer, and how to pray is to wrestle with God.

[ 2 : 20 ] I think we can learn much which is spiritually enriching from this approach, especially if we should read Douglas McMillan's famous book on the subject, Wrestling with God.

I believe he preached these sermons here. However, I want to take a more overarching approach to this passage, and try to understand it in the context of God's grace at work in the life of this man, Jacob.

Remember? Remember? He didn't deserve any of the good things which happened to him. He certainly didn't earn any of the good gifts God gave to him.

That, you see, is what we call grace. In these verses, Genesis 32, 22 to 32, we see God's grace at work in the life of Jacob in three ways.

First, the grace of encounter. Second, the grace of struggle. And third, the grace of reminder. This is grace in Genesis.

[ 3 : 22 ] Not because God's grace belongs only in the history books, but because this grace, shown to us in Christ, is even more freely available to us than it was to Jacob.

The grace, first of all, of encounter. The grace of encounter. Sometimes it's a starkness, not the subtlety of Scripture, which gets us.

In verse 24, we're told, So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. Okay, so this happens, right?

There may be parts of Glasgow, I'm sure we could ask Alistair, would at night, you might get jumped by a thug, and you might have to wrestle with him. But you don't expect it in Bible times. But what's so important, it's not just that Jacob wrestled with someone, but that who this someone was he wrestled with. Because in verse 30, when the dawn arrived, and the man left, we read Jacob called that place Peniel.

[ 4 : 25 ] And it's because I saw God face to face, yet my life was spared. Jacob wrestled with a man. But the more important feature of this passage is, is who that man was.

And according to Jacob's own words, the man was God. It was God he encountered face to face that night. It was God he was wrestling with, God he was struggling against.

He wrestled with God. And yet his life was spared. Now think about this. Jacob had already experienced wonderful things.

He'd heard the stories his father Isaac had told him about all that God had done in his family line.

He'd heard of great victories won, great promises fulfilled, and great sacrifices offered.

He had heard of miraculous conceptions. And with his own eyes, he'd had a vision of a ladder which reached from earth to heaven. He'd been met by angels.

[ 5 : 29 ] And he knew that his life was under the constant supervision of a God who was committed to him and his family line in sovereign love. But all that pales into insignificance to what he experienced in Peniel when he encountered God face to face and wrestled with him.

A greater privilege was bestowed upon Jacob than upon all his fathers before him. For though they may have experienced God, Jacob saw him face to face.

It's often said of the Lord that he spoke with Moses face to face. But before Moses came Jacob. Think of that expression face to face.

An expression which in English we borrow from this passage here in Genesis. At the top of the tower of this building are eight cherubim sculpted into the bricks of which the tower is built.

There are four sets of two. Each set facing the points of the compass. West, north, south, east.

[ 6 : 48 ] Each set has two intricately carved cherubim. And they face one another. They've looked into one another's stony eyes for over 150 years.

All they can see is one another because their visual range is entirely focused on the other. They're close to one another.

They are face to face. Take a look at them when you leave the building this evening. This is the grace of sinful encounter. Of encounter rather.

That a sinful grasper like Jacob should see God face to face. I did not deserve this from God. That's what makes this encounter so much of grace and so little of merit.

During this night's wrestling contest at least. The entirety of the visual range of God is focused on Jacob. And all Jacob can see is God.

[ 7 : 53 ] Can you picture yourself in Jacob's place? Wrestling for a night with God. And seeing him face to face.

The text does not tell us it was a vision. The text tells us it happened. That a sinful man, Jacob, saw God face to face. And lived.

Wouldn't you give everything if you could just see God face to face? Such grace of seeing God face to face was granted to just two great figures from the Old Testament.

Jacob and Moses. Of course such things don't happen in the New Covenant. We shall never see the face of God as Jacob did. No we shall not.

We shall see the face of God better than Jacob did. For we have seen the face of God in a manner they could not have begun to imagine.

[ 8 : 56 ] We've seen the face of God in the face of Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians 4.16 the Apostle Paul says of our salvation. For the God who said let light shine out of darkness.

Has made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. In the face of Christ. We have seen the face of God.

And his name is Jesus Christ. We've seen him clearer. We've seen him more exhaustively than Jacob or Moses could ever have dreamed possible.

Through his word we've seen the face of God in every conceivable situation. In pleasure. And in pain. And in joy. And in gloom.

We've seen him being filled with compassion. When he looks upon the lostness of Israel. We've seen his face streaming with tears. At the gravesite of his friend Lazarus.

[ 9 : 55 ] We've seen him face to face glorified on the Mount of Transfiguration. Transfiguration. We've seen him in temptation. We've seen him in torture. We've seen him in contentment.

We've seen him in joy. We have seen the face of God. His name is Jesus Christ. And that face is filled with unspeakable love and glory. Here's the God we encounter.

The face of a child in a manger. The face of a man on a cross. The face of which Jacob could not even have begun to dream.

And I'm asking us all today. Have you seen the face of God in Jesus Christ? Have you encountered him? I'm not talking here about pictures or statues.

I'm asking whether the Jesus you meet in scripture is enough for you. Yes. Yes he sure he is. He's more than enough for us. He's a Jesus who wants to be encountered by us.

[11:09] And again we ask. How can we encounter this Jesus? Simply by opening our minds to his word. And our hearts to him.

Asking that he would show himself to us. And make us his disciples. The grace first of all of encounter.

Secondly. Secondly. In this passage. We have the grace. Of struggle. Of struggle. I know someone who describes her relationship to God.

As being one of sitting back to back. Life's tough for her. She's struggling with. The situations God has placed in her way. She's not seeing eye to eye with God.

With all reverence. So she's sitting back to back with him. Think of the cherubim. Sculpted into the bricks of the tower here. And how for 150 years.

[12:11] They've been staring into each other's eyes. Ask yourself the question. What posture am I in? With God. Back to back.

Not seeing eye to eye with him. Or face to face. Staring into one another's eyes. Am I absorbed with things? His glory in the face of Jesus Christ?

Or am I ambivalent. Toward him. Or even angry with him? Let me put it another way. Am I struggling with him? Am I wrestling with God?

I do think this is a passage. What can be used to help us in our prayer lives. That we should view prayer as wrestling with God for his blessing. And perhaps at some point it would be great to pick up Douglas Macmillan's book on this subject.

And study it together. But that's not the theme of Jacob's struggle I wish to pursue. Rather it's to explore the wider idea of struggling with God.

[13:13] Let me explain. Jacob. By his own choice. And by the circumstances of his life. Was a man of conflict. We find him here in Genesis 32.

Preparing to meet with his brother Esau. That brother he cheated all those years ago. He's in a conflict of his own making. And perhaps Jacob thinks that Esau's going to kill him.

Jacob's name has also become somewhat of a swear word. With his father-in-law Laban. Whose two daughters Jacob had married.

And whose flocks Jacob had decimated. Jacob has been homeless for many years. Largely because he lived up to his name. Jacob. The grasper.

For sure I'm not sure that out of all the characters in the Bible. We'd like to associate with Jacob. Because he is altogether a very strange man.

[14:16] Here's the ultimate question. With whom has Jacob really been struggling his whole life through? With whom has Jacob been in conflict his whole life through?

Yes we can say he was in conflict with Esau. His brother. You could say he was in conflict with Laban. His father-in-law. But ultimately the point of Genesis 32.

Is that Jacob's life is the history of how he struggled with God. The man he's wrestling with. Gets the point when he renames him Israel.

In verse 28. Meaning he struggles with God. Ultimately Jacob's struggles are with his position as a younger son.

Why did God make me the younger son? So he deceives his father into giving him the blessings of an older son. And he's struggling with his father-in-law Laban.

[15:22] Why am I having to work 14 years for these two daughters of his? It's a struggle he's having with God you see. Not really with Laban. Sometimes ministers experience hostility from church members.

On one occasion I was sent to resolve a conflict. Between a minister and one of his elders in this presbytery. They weren't getting along.

Everything the minister said annoyed this particular elder. And this elder would become particularly angry with the minister. And I was sent by the presbytery to try and find out what was happening.

But also to warn the elder about his aggressive behavior toward his minister. Having faced him up. The elder broke down in front of me.

And told me that the reason he was so angry with his minister. Was because his family life was in tatters. His children were failing in their marriages. Showing no interest in the gospel at all.

[16:27] You see it wasn't really the minister he was angry with. He was just taking out his anger on his minister. He was angry with other things.

Seems to me that more than anyone else. Jacob was struggling with God. After all the new name God gave him.

Israel verse 28 means he struggles with God. The wrestling of the night is a visible demonstration. That Jacob's primary issue isn't with.

It's not with Esau. It's not with Isaac his father. It's not with Laban his father-in-law. It's with God. With who God is. With how God operates.

That's what Jacob really struggles with. He's just like my friend. Who describes her relationship with God. As sitting to him. Back to back.

[17:28] The circumstances of her life aren't good. And yes. She is angry at those who have caused her such pain. But ultimately. Ultimately. She's angry with God.

She's just way too angry to look him in the eye. You know. As I think about my own life. And all those I've been angry with. Or disappointed in. All the circumstances.

Which have run contrary to my expectations. Ultimately. I have to confess. If I'm being honest. My anger was being directed toward God. That the anger I vented on others.

Was me taking out my anger upon God. Anger with God upon them. And I want us to think. All of us. Through this point. Very carefully.

Because it may be the most profound point. I've made all year. When things don't go our way. When we don't get that promotion at work. When that relationship we've invested in.

[18:28] So heavily breaks down. When we don't get the recognition we deserve. Or we think we deserve in the church. We're prone to become angry at others. But actually and ultimately.

It's not them we're angry with. It's God. Who he is. And how he operates. We kick against him.

Many of the Psalms we sing. I'm so grateful for the Psalms. Because they record struggles like these. Psalm 73. The Psalmist is struggling to understand. Why God allows the wicked to prosper.

In Psalm 13. The Psalmist is wrestling with. Why God sometimes. Seems to be absent. Psalm 88. The Psalmist is struggling with. With how God seems to abandon the cause of his people.

And there's grace here. Because the God of infinite love and grace. Invites us to struggle with him. He encourages us.

[19:30] To wrestle with him. He's big enough to take our criticisms. And he's big enough to lovingly. Absorb our blows. I think it's okay.

To pray to God. I have a problem with the way. Your will is working out in my life. Right now. I think it's okay. Because Moses did it.

And Jacob did it. And Jeremiah did it. And even in the New Testament. We find hints of it. We're struggling to understand. Why God is working the way he is in our lives.

And so we're going to him. And we're angry. And in his grace. He allows us to wrestle with him. St. Augustine coined that wonderful phrase.

Faith seeking understanding. And Jacob's wrestling match. Here in Genesis 32. Should also be entitled. Faith seeking understanding. I don't like Jacob.

[20:29] Never have. Never will. But at least here. I can identify with him. I'm sure all of us can identify with him. We don't always understand. Why God sends circumstances into our lives.

And the truth is. Let's face it. We are angry. With him. About it. But we take our anger out on others. Look. Such is the grace of God. That he invites us to wrestle with him. Knowing that. Though ultimately. It might put us out of joint. Pardon the pun. We will come out the other side.

With a renewed faith in him. Let's not be shy. Rather than taking our anger out on others. Let's go to the cross of God's own son.

With that wrestling attitude. Faith. Seeking. Understanding. The grace of struggle. And then lastly.

[21:33] The grace of reminders. The grace of reminders. I want to close where this passage closes. Not by shutting down. Shutting the door in Jacob's experiences.

And saying. Well. Well that struggle with God is. In the past. Now he can forget it. He can move on. Rather. This. Passage closes by saying. The struggle that Jacob had with God.

Needs to be remembered. And needs to be built on. And reflected upon in the future. When a relationship between two people. Breaks down. We often pretend to a restoration. With the words. Let's draw a line in the sand. And let's forget what's behind. Not so with Jacob. Not so with his struggle. Rather.

In Genesis 32. The Holy Spirit leaves us. With the grace of reminders. Before we think to ourselves. This is no big deal. You're picking at straws here.

[ 22 : 28 ] Let's remember that what we call sacraments. Are reminders. The Old Testament sacrament of the Passover. Was God's reminder to the people of Israel.

That he had redeemed them from their slavery. In Egypt. The New Testament sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Is God's reminder to us. Of the cost to him. Of our redemption.

Namely. The life blood of his son. Jesus Christ. Spent on the cross for us. Much of our Christian faith. Is and rightly so. Founded upon the gracious.

Reminders of God. And here in Genesis 32. Very briefly. We have three. In the first instance. In verse 28. Jacob was given a new name.

The name Israel. Which as we have seen. Means. He struggles with God. It's an appropriate name. For the man himself.

[ 23 : 23 ] As we've seen. An even more appropriate name. For the nation. He fathers. The entire Old Testament. Is the history of Israel's. Struggles with God.

Israel's sin. And God's forgiveness. Israel's apostasy. And God's love. Whenever we hear the word Israel. I wonder whether.

Instead of thinking of the modern. Day nation state. We should think. More of ourselves. And ask. In what ways. Am I Israel. In what ways.

Am I wrestling with God. In what ways. Am I angry with him. We should think of God. And his loving commitment. To us.

And how in the fullness of time. He sent his one and only son. Of the genetics. Of Jacob. To the greatest conflict. And struggle of them all. The cross on which he died.

[ 24 : 22 ] To bear our sin. And to give us new life. In the second instance. In verse.

25. And 31. Jacob was given a new injury. A new injury. The angel touched. Jacob's hip. And for the rest of his life. Jacob walked with a limp.

The text tells us. That in honor of this event. The Israelites do not eat. The tendon attached to the socket. Of an animal's hip bone. For the rest of his life.

Jacob carried the scars. Of his face to face encounter. With a living God. In a manner reminiscent. Of Paul in 2nd Corinthians 4.

Jacob was never the same again. He forever carried. In his limp. The scars. Of a divine encounter. But then I guess.

[ 25 : 20 ] It was no different. For our Lord himself. Who even as he. Is seated upon the throne. Of the universe. Looks to. Looks for all the world. Like a lamb. As if it's been slain.

I wonder whether we carry. The scars of our struggles. With God. Mental scars. Emotional scars. Physical even. And then in the third instance.

Jacob gave the place. A new name. In verse 31. He called it. Peniel. 30 and 31. Which means. The face. Of God.

Peniel. Peniel. It was there. In this wilderness place. Jacob met with God. Face to face. And wrestled with him. For him. Peniel. Would always be. A holy place.

Filled with thought. Provoking memories. Now even though. In our reformed tradition. We do not believe. In sacred spaces. There are places.

[ 26 : 18 ] Which. Which. Are perhaps. Baring somewhat. Of the Peniel. Feel. About them. Places. Where we struggle. With God.

And experienced. His grace. In a new way. Places. Which evoke. For us. Very. Strong. Memories. Of God. And the point.

Is this. In his grace. God. Does not. Want us. Ever. To forget. The struggles. We've had. With him. Nor. Those times.

When. More than. Anytime else. We've encountered him. Face to face. He does not. Want us. To forget. Even for one moment. The dying. And the rising.

Of the Lord. Jesus Christ. In whose face. We see God himself. So he gives us. The Lord's Supper. He doesn't want us. To forget. The struggles.

[ 27 : 15 ] We've had. With him. So he gives us. Scars. In our minds. And in our hearts. Which though tender. When we touch them.

Remind us. Of the infinite grace. Of God. At work. In our lives. My mother's here. So she can correct. Me if I'm wrong. But when I was a child.

My father used to wrestle. With me. And hearing the commotion. And the laughter. My mother would come through. From the kitchen. And she'd see this. Tangle of arms. And legs. And tell us both off.

For our foolishness. Both me and my father. Will you stop wrestling. With each other. She'd say. I want to say something. Completely different. When it comes to the grace of God. As demonstrated. Here in Genesis 32. Namely. Will you start. Wrestling. With God. Will you start. Wrestling. With God.

[ 28 : 13 ] Let's pray. Lord our God. We thank and praise you. For these. Special times. In scripture. Where we encounter you. In a new.

Vibrant. Living. Experiential way. Lord. We confess. That there are so many times. When we vent our anger. Upon other people.

But ultimately. It's not. It's not them. We're angry with. It's you. We're angry with. Because you made us. The younger brother. And not the older brother. Because you made us.

Work for 14 years. For the woman. That we loved. Because we're not happy. With the circumstances. Of our lives. And the things. That have happened to us.

And we're angry with you. So we take our anger. Out on others. Lord. As we come to you. We pray for your forgiveness. We pray for a new sense. Of your intimacy.

[ 29 : 09 ] That even as these. Stone cherry boom. Have looked into each other's eyes. For over 150 years. And that entire. That entire vocal range. Has been focused. Upon each other. So even over this.

Christmas period. As we reflect. Upon the coming. Of your son. The one. In whose face. We see your face. That our entire. Visual range.

Will be taken up. With the glory. Of your love. Lord. We thank you. That you're big enough. To deal with our. Arguments. Big enough. To absorb. Our blows.

So Lord. We come to you. And we pray. That you give us. A blessed Christmas. That we may give. Glasgow. A blessed Christmas. We ask these things. In Jesus name. Amen.